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# Access, Participation and Mobility: A Critical Policy Analysis of Higher Education in England between 1987 and 2012

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Thesis submitted in part requirement for the award of Doctor of  
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# Abstract

The thesis is a study of how notions of access, participation and mobility are represented in four successive major policy documents on contemporary British and English higher education. A critical policy text analysis is applied to government White Papers on higher education published in 1987, 1991, 2003 and 2011. Within and between each document, the ideas underpinning these concepts are examined, and their relationships to expansion, the economy and society are explored. The research reports on how these concepts are expressed, how they are combined and how they relate to other policy aims.

In these documents, expressions of access-participation-mobility have shifted from widening access to fair access and from widening participation to social mobility. In tandem, conceptualisations of higher education and society have evolved from the role of higher education as a social good to its function as a vehicle for social mobility. Amid a weakening of lifelong learning as a setting for widening participation, equity-expansion agendas have narrowed from higher education participation at its broadest to access from low-income groups to the most selective universities. The rationale for policies on access-participation-mobility has consistently been underpinned by interpretations of human capital theory and meritocracy. Against this backdrop, policies on access-participation-mobility have been increasingly subordinated to technocratic, economic objectives and framed by marketisation discourses.

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# Introduction

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The 1943 Education White Paper talked specifically about equity and access to the universities:

The path of the poor scholar to the university has been made broader and less difficult during the past twenty years. That the expenditure by the Board through the system of state scholarships and by Local Education Authorities through their major awards has been a profitable investment is shown by the successes achieved at universities by the beneficiaries. None the less, it has to be admitted that the provision of scholarships and bursaries is still inadequate in total and uneven in its incidence (Board of Education, 1943, para 98).

Nearly seventy years later, issues of equity-access were a key theme of the 2011 higher education White Paper:

Higher education can be a powerful engine of social mobility, enabling able young people from low-income backgrounds to earn more than their parents and providing a route into the professions for people from non-professional backgrounds. But as we set out in our recent strategy for social mobility, *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers*, there are significant barriers in the way of bright young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds accessing higher education (DBIS, 2011a, p. 54).

Concerns for inequalities in higher education have, therefore, featured in official policy contexts in England for a considerable time. Yet, despite political attention and mass growth in England's higher education system, a substantial body of research demonstrates that disparities in patterns of access and participation amongst domestic (UK domiciled) students have persisted over time.

To further explore these policy concerns and understand how they bear on wider conceptualisations of higher education and society, the thesis is a study of how notions of *access*, *participation* and *mobility* have been *represented* in official policy contexts between 1987 and 2012. The three concepts are the focal point of the study due to their significance as equity-related themes and policy motifs in English higher education policy. Examining access, participation and mobility also

opens the door to exploring related concepts, such as meritocracy, equality of opportunity and social justice, which provide lenses for considering the broader sets of ideas shaping policy concerns for equity.

The period between 1987 and 2012 has been chosen due to its importance in the expansion and development of the higher education system in England. During these twenty-five years the higher education participation rate increased more than three-fold, from around 14 to 49 per cent. The extent of growth during this period has been extensive, often far surpassing Government forecasts. As such, the elite-mass-universal model of higher education growth, set out by Martin Trow (1974), provides a valuable framework for examining this period. The model sets out an ideal-type hypothesis for growth in developed countries whereby higher education systems move from elite participation levels (up to 20 per cent participation) to mass (20 to 50 per cent), then universal levels (50 per cent or more). According to the elite-mass-universal model, mass expansion (massification) occurred in England between 1987 and 2012; higher education moved rapidly from an elite to a near-universal system.

In practice, Trow (1974) contends that the process of mass expansion creates new sources of tension and complexity within higher education and its broader socio-political contexts. These tensions can emerge within the institutional setting in relation, for example, to selection and recruitment practices, learning and teaching, and student support. National policies on expansion, access and the distribution of places can also present contexts for new tensions to unfold. A tension evident in England, which is particularly salient to the thesis, is represented by a persistent pattern of inequity in the distribution of places across society, despite the transition from elite to near-universal status. As Brown and Carasso note (2013), while mass expansion has seen considerably more students from middle and working class backgrounds participating in higher education, students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds remain considerably under-represented. In addition, and looking specifically at the period between 1960 and 1995, Boliver (2010) reveals that:

Throughout this 35-year period, qualitative inequalities between social classes in the odds of enrolment on more traditional and

higher status degree programmes and at 'Old' universities remained fundamentally unchanged. In short, social class inequalities in British higher education have been both maximally and effectively maintained (p. 229).

Tensions concerning *who* is and is not participating in higher education, and in which *types* of higher education are, therefore, important considerations for the period of mass higher education expansion in England. Indeed, questions of distributive justice feature extensively in contemporary education debate and policy in England.

One of the 'aspects of transition' associated with the shift from elite towards universal levels of participation is the idea that, as expansion advances, higher education becomes 'increasingly shaped by democratic political processes' (Trow, 1974, p. 99). National policies on expansion and reform produced and communicated by Government are, therefore, a fundamental characteristic of the transition from elite, to mass, to universal status. In England, White Papers on higher education are the main vehicle expressing Government policy intention, indicating key areas of political interest and priority during any given era. The study, subsequently, explores how access, participation and mobility feature in the official policy context during the period of mass expansion in England. Specifically, the thesis follows a conceptual and thematic critical policy analysis of the four higher education White Papers published between 1987 and 2012, which are:

- Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge (DES, 1987)
- Higher Education: A New Framework (DES, 1991a)
- The Future of Higher Education (DfES, 2003)
- Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System (DBIS, 2011a).

The four White Papers represent the main units of analysis and core texts of the study. As such, the focus is on policy as produced text (text publication), as one phase in the policy 'lifecycle' (Bowe et al, 1992). Importantly, the study is interested in this phase set against the relevant social, political, historical and economic contexts



The methodology framing the study is social constructivist and interpretive in nature. Policy is considered as an inherently social *process* embedded within its wider contexts. To explore how access-participation-mobility are represented and what this might reveal of how Government understands higher education in society, the readings of the core texts are guided by policy sociology and critical policy analysis approaches. While policy sociology facilitates the use of sociological concepts as lenses for a thematic and conceptual analysis of the White Papers, critical policy analysis helps to deconstruct and interpret these readings, to examine the ideas underpinning expressions of access, participation and mobility. The focus on texts as genuine and legitimate subjects of analysis draws specifically on critical policy analysis approaches followed by Stephen Ball (Ball, 1990, 2010) and critical discourse analysis approaches of David Hyatt (2005, 2013).

In addition to exploring the sets of ideas underpinning policy articulations of access-participation-mobility, their relationship with policies on expansion, structural reform and competition is also considered. The aim here is to further understand the contexts, justifications for and priority of policy concerns for equity. The broader socio-economic and political contexts are set out alongside the readings of each of the White Papers to help strengthen and ground the analysis. In particular, including details of the settings framing each of the core texts highlights the importance of specific themes and ideas surrounding equity matters, and the extent they are embedded within key Government narratives during each policy era.

Building on the chosen methodological framework and to structure the analysis of the ideas set out above, the main research question of the study is:

**How have the concepts of access, participation and mobility been represented in official policy texts on higher education in England between 1987 and 2012?**

There are also three supplementary research questions, which help to frame the readings of the core texts. They are:

- What is the content and character of access-participation-mobility as sets of ideas in official policy texts?
- Have expressions of access-participation-mobility in official policy texts changed over time? If so, how?
- How do access-participation-mobility discourses interact with other discourses in the chosen texts?

The thesis is organised around three sections, as follows:

1. **Approach:** providing an overview of the field of inquiry and a summary of higher education development since 1945. This section also presents the methodology, research methods and research questions of the study.
2. **Readings and Findings:** comprising four chapters examining each White Paper in turn, focusing specifically on how they express notions of access, participation and mobility.
3. **Analysis and Conclusions:** bringing together the main findings and conclusions of the study and their possible implications.

Within the three main sections of the thesis there are ten chapters and an introduction arranged within the structure set out below:

**Introduction:** an overview of the study, including the approach, research questions and structure of the thesis.

## **Approach**

1. **Field of inquiry:** an outline of the body of literature in which the study is situated.
2. **Context of higher education in England:** a summary of higher education development between 1945 and 2012, to set the foundations and context for the analysis.
3. **The research questions:** their focus and significance.
4. **Methodology, methods and texts:** a description of the methodological approach and chosen research methods, including the readings of the core texts.

## Readings and Findings

5. **Higher education: meeting the challenge:** a textual analysis of the 1987 White Paper, a document which sought to expand access and satisfy 'manpower' demand ahead of a demographic downturn.
6. **Higher education: a new framework:** a textual analysis of the 1991 White Paper, a document which set out to increase participation through greater competition.
7. **The future of higher education:** a textual analysis of the 2003 White Paper, a document that proposed a 50 per cent target for participation and the introduction of variable fees.
8. **Higher education: students at the heart of the system:** a textual analysis of the 2011 White Paper, a document in which funding for institutions and growth was designed to follow the decisions of students.

## Analysis and Conclusions

9. **Analysis and Discussion:** a drawing together of the readings of each of the White Papers, identifying the key findings of the study and discussing their implications.
10. **Conclusions:** a reflection of the research process and a consideration of how policies on access-participation-mobility have developed since the 2011 White Paper.

# APPROACH

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## 1. Field of Inquiry

### Introduction

This chapter outlines the body of literature concerning issues of access, participation and mobility in higher education. The aim here is to position the study within its broader field of inquiry and inform the themes for analysis within the chosen texts. The concept-led review of the relevant literature in this chapter, combined with an overview of the post-war higher education context in England in Chapter 2, provide the foreground for the research questions framing the study, which are described in Chapter 3. As such, the exploration of the literature in the first two chapters is intended to act as a ‘springboard into the study’ (Cohen et al, 2011, p. 21).

The general field of inquiry is the sociology of education, to reflect the interest of the study in the relationships between education and society. Whilst the literature in this field is extensive, Moore (1996) suggests that its main features can be organised into four topics relating to: (i) power in society, for example questions of social class, subordination and inequality, (ii) the systemic nature of power, or how power in society is reflected in institutional processes, (iii) the reproduction of power in society through educational inequality, and (iv) the ways in which education might challenge patterns of inequality. Power in sociological research can be defined not only as the capacity to direct and achieve prescribed objectives but, importantly, as a ‘synonym for *influence*’ (Johnston et al, 2002, p. 629).

Building on the foundations of the sociology of education, the study draws on the more specific field of education policy sociology. Consequently, the thesis aligns itself with the notion that policy is historically, culturally and socially embedded (Ball, 1990, 2010; Prunty, 1985; Shattock, 2012). A common assumption of policy sociology research, and guiding principle for the study, is that policy informs and is informed by the societal power relations noted above (Taylor, 1997). Research

in this field also acknowledges the value-laden, 'messy' nature of policy, on the grounds that policy cannot be divorced from the complexities of its wider social environment (Ball, 2007, 2010). With reference to the extensive policy sociology research conducted by Stephen Ball, the study is concerned with macro-level policy that steers national agendas for higher education, and which is normally formalised through government legislation. Ball (1998, 2007) describes such policy as 'Big' policy, or 'Policy' with a capital 'P'. This type of policy is referred to as *official policy* throughout the study.

Other research in the field of policy sociology has informed expansion-equity debates. In particular, the work of Martin Trow (1974, 2006) highlights important connections and tensions between higher education expansion and the distribution of places within society. Within these debates, higher education is typically defined as a 'system'; a coherent, nationally organised structure (Tight, 2009). Use of the term 'system' in the thesis is mindful of its contested nature, to acknowledge that continuous flux in higher education-state-market relationships and increasing diversification, mean that higher education in England could be considered as 'several differentiated network of sectors' (Filippakou et al, 2012, p. 106).

To organise the literature around the three concepts of access, participation and mobility, this chapter is structured by the following sections:

1. **Access** as entry to higher education: examining processes and factors affecting entry to higher education, for example selection practices and affirmative action.
2. **Participation** and distribution: exploring debates around the distribution of higher education places, *who* participates and in what *type* of higher education.
3. **Mobility**, social reproduction and society: considering higher education and social outcomes, including the construction of higher education as a social and private good.

### 1.1 Access as entry to higher education

The concept of access features extensively in education policy research. In particular, debates involving access in England are typically, although not exclusively, associated with *who* enters higher education and how. Research has traditionally focused on access amongst under-represented groups (for example, Archer and Yamashita, 2003; Ball et al, 2002; Reay 2001, 2003). In the literature, under-represented groups are those who have not traditionally participated in higher education, including students from low-income backgrounds, specific age groups, genders or ethnicity, and disabled students. More recent studies focus on under-represented groups entering the most selective, prestigious universities (Boliver, 2013; Harris, 2010). These universities typically *select* students from a competitive pool of applicants presenting the highest entry grades (Sutton Trust, 2011). They include research-intensive universities, identified by national quality measures, such as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). In the UK, the 24 'leading' research-intensive institutions are brought together by the Russell Group (Russell Group, 2013). The oldest and, arguably, most prestigious universities (Oxford and Cambridge) are members of the Russell Group and feature extensively in research into 'fair access' (Boliver, 2013, Zimdars et al, 2009).

Within debates on fair access, Trow (1974) emphasises the complexities concerning *access* that can arise during the mass expansion of higher education systems. He suggests that 'attitudes to access' are another key feature of transition as systems move between elite-mass-universal status:

The ease of access to higher education is closely linked to conceptions that people – students, and their parents, and increasingly colleges and university teachers and administrators – have of college and university attendance (Trow, 1974, p. 94).

As a result, expansion does not necessarily mean that access is opened up to all sections of society in equal measures; it can give rise to new, and often contentious, questions about the processes governing *who* enters:

As Trow pointed out, massification implies more than an increase in numbers; it involves *inter alia* more open access and a more heterogeneous student body and therefore struggles over who it

should be for and how the worthy should be identified are integral to these wider debates (Davies et al, 1997, p. 1).

Highlighting the tensions associated with how the 'worthy' are defined helps to illustrate how power can feature in expansion-equity debates and, moreover, in policies on access. In addition, this particular aspect of access assists in differentiating access from *participation*. Skyrme (2009) notes that whilst there is a tendency in the literature for interchangeable use of *access* and *participation*, it is important to distinguish between the two concepts. Within the thesis access is understood as the processes and factors influencing *entrance* to higher education and, specifically, amongst under-represented groups. It is acknowledged that access also incorporates meso-level (institutional) procedures, such as admissions and selection practices, as well as micro level issues, including applicant behaviour and attitudes. Conversely, the study recognises that participation brings together issues associated with the *distribution* of higher education places, including policies on expansion. Factors influencing progression, such as student support and student expectations, attitudes and behaviours, can also be included amongst the body of research into matters of participation.

Returning specifically to access, selection practices have an important bearing on *who* enters higher education. Early research suggests that these practices are inherently social. Moreover, they can embody and reproduce forms of power in society. Ralph Turner (1960) puts forward two different models of mobility for England and North America, which can be helpful when thinking about access to higher education. The different models indicate that access in national education systems can be governed by distinct approaches to student selection and, more broadly, to historical, social and cultural contexts. The first model is based on the English 'sponsored mode' of mobility where the assessment of academic ability and selection based on academic achievement occur at an early stage. In the North American model of 'contest mobility' selection tends to happen as late as possible. In principle, access is considered to be more open on the basis that assessment of academic ability may not factor in the selection process at all, at least in the early stages of higher education. Turner (1960) suggests that in open access systems individuals are 'kept in the race for as long as possible' (p. 855),

whereas in the English model individuals tend to be *selected out* at a much earlier stage.

Research by Turner assists in framing the socio-historical factors, that can influence patterns of access to higher education. As Boliver (2011) notes, the British social class structure is reflected in its higher education system. Indeed, patterns of social stratification can be perpetuated by patterns of hierarchy in higher education systems, and vice-versa. In this context, research by Archer and Yamashita (2003) suggests that 'complex social and institutional factors' must be accounted for when considering access (p. 53). For example, research has found that the culture of assessment and selection in the British education system has a bearing on the cognitive processes of individuals at an early state, which can, subsequently, influence decisions about higher education. Young people who did not perform well earlier in their education can internalise feelings of academic failure and a self-perception that they are not good enough for higher education (Reay, 2001). Fears about not 'fitting in' amongst young people from under-represented groups have also been found to have an adverse effect on decisions about whether to apply to higher education and, specifically, to the elite universities (Reay, 2003; Reay et al, 2009a, 2009b). As a consequence, individuals may select *themselves* out by not applying to higher education at all.

As debates concerning access have evolved in England, attention has increasingly focused on admissions practices in higher education. Whilst details of the national admissions system are covered in Chapter 2, its relevance here is the emerging body of research examining higher education admissions functions as gatekeepers to access. Based on a comparison of applications and offers to Russell Group institutions by socio-economic background, Boliver (2013) concludes that access to the elite universities is not fair, on the basis that access amongst the disadvantaged is not equal, even for those with the same A-level grades, or equivalent, as their more privileged counterparts. These disparities are thought to stem from barriers to applying in the first place and differential treatment at the admissions stage. Furthermore, Zimdars et al (2009) suggest that the higher proportion of graduates from the most selective universities securing roles in leading professions mean that these institutions play a 'unique role in the social reproduction of British society' (p. 649). The important issue here is the



connection made in the literature between selection practices, broader patterns of social stratification, modes of access and subsequent patterns of participation. These observations further strengthen the principle that examining access cannot be divorced from a consideration of the social context.

The emergence of admissions practices as a feature of research into higher education access and equity includes a new focus on affirmative action. Affirmative action in higher education refers to specific and proactive interventions aimed at ensuring equal consideration for all prospective students (Zamani and Brown, 2003). While affirmative action is rooted in the open access movements of the 1950s and 1960s in North America, it has become a topic of contemporary debate in England, particularly in relation to *contextual admissions*. Contextual admissions is applied here as shorthand for the use of contextual data (information about students' social and educational background) to inform admissions decisions. The thinking behind contextual admissions assumes that innate ability is influenced by social factors, which are reflected in relationships between social disadvantage, lower levels of academic achievement and progression to higher education. Contextual admissions is seen as a way of moderating this relationship. In practice, contextual admissions decisions involve taking account of a range ('basket') of indicators to discern the level of disadvantage, and may, then, involve setting lower entry grades, or offering a guaranteed interview, for the most disadvantaged applicants (Bridger et al, 2012, p. v).

Research into affirmative action (in the form of contextual admissions) in England has included studies assessing degree outcomes at institutions operating contextual admissions initiatives. Although these studies are relatively small in number, they have found that degree outcomes are comparable between those accepted via contextualised decisions and those who were not (Hoare and Johnston, 2011). In other words, despite entering with lower academic grades, individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds perform equally to their better off peers entering with higher grades. Importantly, the issue of affirmative action has a bearing on the well-established principle of institutional autonomy in England, and perspectives on the extent to which the state should promote equity through specific and targeted interventions. Contemporary debate can be organised into

liberal perspectives, which argue that affirmative action is a form of 'social engineering' (Asthana, 2008; Henry, 2012; Lucas, 2010), and interventionist positions, which call for more proactive approaches from Government (Dorling and Cover, 2005).

Including affirmative action within the body of research on higher education access also provides an opportunity to engage with notions of meritocracy. Meritocracy cuts across access-participation-mobility representing, at its broadest, the idea that fairness in society is realised where individuals *achieve* rather than *inherit* social status. Goldthorpe (2003) suggests that a truly meritocratic society constitutes that where educational attainment, rather than social class background, mediates social class destination. Classical meritocracy infers that education can, therefore, overcome familial background and forces of social reproduction across generations; on this basis, expansion of higher education is often justified (Themelis, 2008).

The work of Michael Young is important to a consideration of meritocracy, specifically his political satire *The Rise of the Meritocracy* and definition of merit as 'IQ plus effort' (2008 [1958]). Whilst Young intended to warn that a reliance on merit would increase, rather than reduce, issues of social stratification, meritocracy has been widely accepted in educational debates in England and beyond. As Breen and Goldthorpe (2001) suggest meritocracy has become 'an ideal in post-industrial society' (p. 81). Young (2001), however, contends that meritocracy, as a social policy aspiration, should be used with caution. In particular, he criticises its overuse by the New Right in North America since the 1980s and by New Labour in the UK since the late 1990s. Skyrme (2009) agrees that discussions around widening access tend to be shaped by a 'limited meritocratic paradigm that infinite places are available at leading institutions for deserving students, whatever their background' (p. 8). As such, the link between access and policies on the expansion and distribution of higher education places is highlighted. In turn, the importance of considering issues of access alongside those concerning participation is acknowledged. Indeed, David (2010) recommends having an understanding of the issues affecting access before researching questions about participation and, in particular, widening participation.

## **1.2 Participation and distribution**

At its broadest, participation relates to the proportion of adults, normally defined by a specific age group, taking part in higher education. As noted previously, within expansion-equity debates participation extends to considerations about the distribution of higher education places in society. The notion of distribution can comprise macro-level questions about fairness and equity, namely *how* higher education places should be distributed, *to whom* and, *which principles* (governed by the state or market) should direct these decisions. 'Marketisation' discourses help to frame these questions and Gareth Williams (1995) has contributed considerably to research in this area. He defines marketisation as the processes by which market principles, like competition and differentiation, are introduced incrementally to higher education systems.

As for the different positions on the idea of marketisation, Tooley (1996) suggests that the market is the most appropriate means of mediating distribution and equalising opportunities for participation by facilitating the 'level playing field'. This perspective aligns with New Public Management (NPM) discourses, which have dovetailed with the advancement of marketisation in England's higher education system. NPM promotes the principles of quality, accountability and efficient management of services against specified performance indicators. Ball (2010) argues that NPM has framed the 're-engineering' of public services, including education, during the last two decades, replacing principles associated with academic leadership, such as 'professionalism and ethics', with neo-liberal notions of 'entrepreneurship and competition' (p. 47). Other research suggests that marketisation may, in fact, compound inequality in so far as the market simply confers the best outcomes to the strongest players.

The body of research exploring broader matters of distributive justice in society helps to further situate debates concerning higher education participation. This area of research has been heavily influenced by the work of John Rawls. His *Theory of Justice* (1973) suggests that proper organisation of social advantage can help to address existing inequities in the distribution of life chances. Rawls' 'difference principle' is based on the idea that inequity in society is appropriate, provided it benefits the disadvantaged as well as the privileged. However, critics suggest that equality is more attainable through a straightforward interventionist

approach that prioritises those who are most in need (Mouffe, 1993; Sen, 2009). Duru-Bellat (2008) recommends a fine-tuned meritocracy where positive discrimination allocates sufficient safeguards for the 'weakest pupils' (p. 92). National policy has a significant, and power-laden, function here in deciding *who* should be safeguarded and prioritised (Watson, 2006).

As noted in the Introduction, the elite-mass-universal model of expansion (Trow, 1974) provides a conceptual lens for exploring the tensions and complexities for equity that can arise as higher education systems grow en masse. While national statistics demonstrate that higher education in England has expanded significantly in the last three decades (DES, 1987; DBIS, 2014b), the elite-mass-universal model facilitates a qualitative and granular consideration of the *processes* of expansion, including the role national policy plays, and what these processes can mean for equity and opportunity. The work of Trow also raises the notion of democratisation, demonstrating how this can act as a significant driver for the shift from elite to universal participation levels:

One secular trend in modern times – a movement that in Western countries is unbroken for at least two centuries and shows no signs of weakening – is the fundamental democratisation of society. In its earliest forms this involved the extension of the franchise and other aspects of political power to larger and larger sections of the society. In addition, there has been a continued weakening of traditional social distinctions and the extension of various social and economic rights (which were once privileges) to ever broader sections of the community (Trow, 1974, p. 131).

While the notion of democratisation helps to frame the changes in expectation within society that shape processes of mass expansion, studies investigating *who* participates and in which *forms* of higher education illustrate the nuances that can accompany higher education growth. This extensive body of research, typically situated in the field of widening participation, focuses on under-representation in higher education, be it by age, neighbourhood, disability, ethnicity, school background or social class. Taking each of these variables in turn and, given that participation in England is dominated by the age 18 to 20 population (HESA, 2013), mature learners feature in the literature (Fuller and Heath 2010; Reay 2003; Webb 2013). Research shows that mature learners have

traditionally clustered in narrowly defined areas of higher education, being over-represented in vocational courses and under-represented in the elite institutions. These studies challenge the extent to which Government policies on lifelong learning have been fully inclusive. In contrast, participation by gender is relatively even, with females becoming more evenly represented over the last 40 years (DBIS, 2013). Research tends to combine gender with other factors, such as social class or ethnicity (Lucy and Walkerdine, 2000; Plummer, 2000). Gendered patterns in specific areas of higher education, for example, the under-representation of females in postgraduate study, have become a more recent area of interest (Beer, 2013).

Other studies examine participation by area of residence and point to a 'neighbourhood effect' in patterns of participation (Bauder, 2008). According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), the national agency for higher education statistics, just 10 per cent of young people aged 18-30 in England enter first-time undergraduate degrees from areas with the lowest participation levels (HESA, 2012). Statistical models ranking neighbourhoods by participation rate are, therefore, used to inform national funds for widening participation activity (managed by HEFCE) and the contextual admissions practices of some higher education institutions. Research also suggests that specific ethnic groups (namely Indian and Chinese) are better represented than others (Bhattacharyya et al, 2003), while, overall, ethnic minorities are proportionately under-represented in the more selective institutions in England (Boliver, 2014). Other research examines ethnicity and social class identity, revealing that history of participation within the family and local community and patterns of educational achievement in school bear on aspirations for higher education (Ball, 2010; Ball et al, 2002).

Care leavers are another under-represented group featuring in the widening participation literature. Just 6 per cent of students leaving care at age 16 participate in higher education by age 19, compared with 42 per cent of all 19 year olds in England (Buttle Trust, 2013). Barriers to access, such as finance, lack of guidance from carers or professionals about the choices and support available, are a focal point of this research (Jackson and Ayaji, 2007). In relation to disability, the different types and definitions of disability and inconsistencies in how data is collected at the application and enrolment stages have created challenges for

deriving national participation rates (Ramsden, 2005). Nevertheless, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills estimates that some 30 per cent of young disabled people participate in higher education, compared with 45 per cent of those without disabilities (DIUS, 2009). Research here is orientated towards learning experiences and identity, and the nature of support available in higher education for disabled students (David, 2010).

Widening participation research also explores participation by entry qualifications and school type. Although the Advanced Level (A-level) in England, has traditionally dominated access, entry routes have broadened in recent years with those entering with BTECs (a national vocational qualification) increasing by 80 per cent between 2008 and 2012 (UCAS, 2012). Crozier et al (2010), however, found that 12.4 per cent of entrants with vocational backgrounds leave higher education after their first year, compared with 6.7 per cent of those with academic qualifications. Whilst entry qualifications appear to influence chances of progression, the literature concurs that a broader acceptance of alternative qualifications in recent years has supported access and participation agendas.

As for school background, The Sutton Trust (2011) reports that young people from private schools are over twice as likely as those from state-run comprehensives to study at elite universities. Schooling effects, caused by the 'institutional habitus', are thought to have transformative effects on aspirations (Reay et al, 2001). The idea of habitus draws on the Bourdieusian notion that the school culture embodies social capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). The provision of support, such as advice and guidance for applying to higher education and preparing for selection interviews, are examples of social capital. The research contends that, where schools are rich in expectation and relevant support (social capital), young people are more likely to progress.

Other studies investigate the ways in which social background informs how individuals 'construct' the idea of higher education:

The growing gap between the rich and poor has become an accepted part of the 'ways things are' for many in England, often understood through discourses of individualisation which

attribute material success or failure to individual effort, individual talent or a mixture of the two (Reay, 2001, p. 335).

Reay draws linkages between the research on access *and* participation by suggesting above that processes of internalised failure, reinforced by institutional habitus and a culture of assessment, negatively influence decisions about applying to higher education. She claims that stratification embodied in the British education system discourages young people from poorer backgrounds from applying to higher education, particularly to the more selective universities. Moreover, Reay (2001) notes that historic stratification in British society has influenced the extent to which social class dominates widening participation debates. In this context, much of the *widening* participation research focuses on *barriers* to participation. Gorard et al (2006) group these into situational, personal circumstances (e.g. cost or caring responsibilities); institutional barriers (e.g. available provision and access related issues such as admissions procedures and entry requirements); and dispositional barriers (e.g. cognitive factors like aspiration and attitudes to learning).

Whilst school type is often used as an indicator of social class in debates about widening participation, research draws on a combination of factors to determine disadvantage, including family income, parental occupation or locality. For example, HESA (2012) found that only 30 per cent of young people enter higher education from National Statistic Socio-economic Classification classes 4-7 (i.e. with parents from lower earning, skilled and manual occupational backgrounds). Conversely students from classes 1-3 (whose parents are in managerial or professional occupations), represent 70 per cent of those participating in higher education. Although participation rates amongst disadvantaged groups are improving, including in the elite universities (Russell Group, 2015), a persistent gap between the most and least advantaged continues to provide the context for a broad and extensive corpus of research concerning higher education, social background and participation. In the main, this research and policy has focused on patterns of equity amongst domestic (UK-domiciled) students progressing to undergraduate study. As such, the interest in access-participation-mobility in the thesis is concerned with domestic rather than international students.

### **1.3 Mobility, social reproduction and society**

For the purpose of the study, mobility is understood as the movement of individuals between different positions in society. Mobility is typically defined two-fold in the literature: (i) intra-generational mobility, the degree of movement between social positions over the life course, and (ii) inter-generational mobility, the extent to which an individual's status reflects that of their parents (Blanden et al, 2011; Goldthorpe and Jackson, 2007). The concept of mobility has its origins in modernisation theory and an assumption that educational expansion and upward mobility are positively correlated:

The idea that educational expansion serves to increase equality of opportunity has a long pedigree in sociology. Proponents of modernisation theory in particular expected to see social inequalities in educational participation and attainment decline as industrial societies expanded their educational systems on the road to becoming education-based meritocracies (Boliver, 2010, p.1).

Social mobility emerged during the 1950s in sociological research in North America (Lipset and Bendix, 1962; Blau and Duncan, 1967) and England (Glass, 1954). In respect of higher education, Trow (1974) believed there was a close link between expansion and upward mobility:

Sending one's sons or daughters to college or university is already, and will increasingly be, a symbol of rising social status. Not only does it give evidence of status mobility in the adult generation – in this respect resembling the purchase of a home in the country or an automobile – but it also lays the necessary foundation for the social mobility of a family across generations (p. 127).

The emergence of social mobility as a topic of sociological and educational research dovetailed with a new, liberal era of political thought promoting meritocratic forms of mobility, which valued academic achievement and equality. Bell (1972) draws a connection between liberalism, meritocracy, equality of opportunity and mobility:

The principle of equality of opportunity derives from a fundamental tenet of classic liberalism: that the individual- and not the family, the community, the state- is the basic unit of



society, and that the purpose of societal arrangements is to allow the individual the freedom to fulfil his own purposes – by his labour to gain property, by exchange to satisfy his wants, by upward mobility to achieve a place commensurate with his talents (p. 40).

More recently, Gorard (2008) illustrates how education policy emphasises links between notions of meritocracy and mobility:

The role of education in social mobility is unclear, but much of the enormous levels of state spending on education in developed nations is justified by the idea of merit selection. Merit selection means that education overcomes social origin – how well a child does at school should not depend on social class, for example (p. 26).

Given the prevalence of meritocracy in debates about access, participation *and* mobility, evidence of whether meritocracy features and, if so, how, as a theme in official policy contexts is sought in the readings of the four White Papers.

The categorisation of occupational groups as an indicator of social status formed the basis of early thinking in social mobility research (Moser and Hall, 1954). John Goldthorpe (1987) has contributed considerably to this body of research over the last three decades and, using occupational category as a basis, developed a social class schema structured around seven class positions. Class I groups represent higher-grade professionals and administrators whilst Class VII groups comprise manual, semi- and unskilled occupations. The schema has informed empirical research and policy, both nationally and internationally. Occupational class definitions can, however, be problematic and do not necessarily capture all sections of society or professions. Consequently, there is extensive discussion surrounding issues of methodology and research methods in social mobility research (Breen and Goldthorpe, 2002; Saunders 1997, 2002). Importantly, some authors suggest that policy does not always acknowledge the empirical issues associated with defining and measuring mobility (Goldthorpe and Jackson, 2007).

Empirical debates about social mobility tend to oscillate on different interpretations of society, meritocracy and equality of opportunity. Saunders (1997, 2002) claims that Britain is largely meritocratic in so far as class position *is*

typically determined by ability and effort. However, Breen and Goldthorpe (1999, 2002) argue that social background leaves a considerable and enduring mark on life chances. In turn, this directs attention to research into social reproduction, which examines how background, notably parents' social status, influences opportunity and life chances. The cognitive factors that manifest themselves in personal experiences of upward mobility are also explored in this context:

For Lipset, mobility is not merely a matter of movement along socio-economic continua; it also typically involves processes of detachment from and attachment to particular collectivities, and these processes may be made more complicated, and more stressful psychologically, on account of mobility being often only partial (Goldthorpe, 1987, p. 18).

As Goldthorpe acknowledges, upward mobility is a complex and non-linear process. Other research into social reproduction suggests that the extent to which academic achievement can positively mediate social mobility is limited. For example, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) contend there are flaws in classical meritocracy, due to the reproduction of social stratification in education systems, which creates specific challenges for mobility. Simister (2011) has also found that educational achievement (merit) is not immune from social class influence, while earlier research in France demonstrates that young people of privileged and middle-class backgrounds have a predetermined advantage to succeed in meritocratic education systems. Social class can, therefore, have a greater influence, than academic achievement, on chances of higher education participation and upward mobility (Boudon, 1974). Furthermore, as selectivity increases which, for England, is at the point of entry to higher education, father's occupation and mother's level of education appear to have a greater bearing on the chances of participation and social mobility later on (Duru-Bellat and Kieffer, 2000).

Other studies demonstrate that the effects of social reproduction can continue beyond higher education. Although individuals from privileged backgrounds tend to perform equally, if not worse, than their disadvantaged peers whilst in higher education, they are more likely to secure higher paid, higher status careers after graduating (DfES, 2004; Sutton Trust, 2004). Research by the British Government Adviser on social mobility, Alan Milburn, concurs that the higher status

professions in England continue to be dominated by those from more privileged backgrounds (Milburn, 2012a). Chan and Boliver (2013) attribute this difference to the 'grandparent effect'. They found that the chances of grandchildren entering a professional-managerial profession are at least two and a half times higher where the grandparents had a professional-managerial occupation themselves. The effects of social background can, therefore, recur across more than one generation.

Literature focusing on the idea of higher education as public (social) and private goods provides another lens for understanding the relationships between higher education, society and mobility. The notion of public-private good stems from research by Paul Samuelson (1954) and, in the context of higher education, Brown and Carasso (2013) define public goods as 'non-rivalrous and non-excludable' and private goods as 'rivalrous and excludable' (p. 22). Public goods are not constrained by finite availability and their benefits extend collectively to society as a whole. As an example, higher education is thought to instil 'democratic citizenship, order and culture' as individuals studying at a higher level broaden their understanding of themselves and how they fit within their broader society (Klemenčič, 2011, p. 74). The benefits of private goods, on the other hand, are limited to the individual purchaser. The notion of higher education as a private good is thought to have emerged in tandem with neo-liberal, New Right movements of the 1980s, which brought with them themes of competition and 'individualism' (Brady, 2012; Souto-Otero, 2011).

Marginson (2011) suggests that perspectives on higher education as public and private goods rest on different and, often, opposing value positions:

Higher education institutions are more or less 'public' or 'private' according to the policy and funding configuration chosen for them. In turn, that configuration always rests on one or another philosophical position (p. 413).

The different philosophical positions underpinning the public-private good phenomenon are helpful in framing the multiple perspectives on the role of higher education as regards social mobility. The idea of higher education as a private good also provides an explanation for counter positions to affirmative

action, which, in England, have manifested in adverse reactions to contextual admissions policies via the aforementioned claims of 'social engineering' (Henry, 2012). These positions align closely with the idea that the market, rather than the state, is better placed to create the conditions for equality of opportunity. Alternative perspectives challenge the consumerisation of the student identity and commodification of higher education. They claim that marketisation is in tension with the civic and social purpose of higher education (Brown and Carasso, 2013; Molesworth et al, 2009). Importantly, debates on higher education as a public and private good illustrate how, as systems expand, higher education can fall under pressure to represent both sets of goods simultaneously, and this can create other sources of stress and strain for higher education policy (Collini, 2012).

#### **1.4 Access-participation-mobility**

In conclusion, this chapter illustrates areas of convergence and divergence in the literature between and across the concepts of (fair) access, (widening) participation and (social) mobility. The prefixes are included in brackets as they are often, but not always, used alongside the three concepts in the literature to qualify and, or, differentiate between different interpretations of the concepts. This chapter sets the foreground for examining how the three concepts are represented in the core texts, paying particular attention to their underlying sets of ideas and the ways they interact (and possibly overlap) in the documents. It is acknowledged that access, participation and mobility are not necessarily linked in a linear way. However, to recognise the relationships evident in the literature, and for ease of reference, the three concepts are referred to as access-participation-mobility throughout the thesis. In order to contextualise this conceptual and literary overview, and set the foundations for the readings of the core texts, the following chapter outlines the development of the higher education system in England since the Second World War.

## 2. Context of Higher Education in England

### Introduction

Whilst the focus of the study is on the twenty-five years between 1987 and 2012, the aim of this chapter is to capture the essence of higher education development in England since 1945. Building on the concept-led literary review set out in Chapter 1, this chapter further sets the scene for the critical policy analysis of the study before a presentation of the research questions.

The chapter is structured chronologically around the main waves of expansion since 1945, as outlined below. It must be stressed that changes to higher education in England during this period have been significant and extensive and, as such, the scope of the study only permits a broad summary of developments, focusing specifically on those which bear on matters of access-participation-mobility. The five sections of the chapter are organised as follows:

- Growing demand and a committee on higher education (1945-1963)
- Post-Robbins growth and a binary policy (1964-1987)
- Mass expansion, a funding crisis and a national inquiry into higher education (1988-1997)
- Post-Dearing renewed growth, cost sharing and near-universal participation (1998-2007)
- A new fees regime and the higher education market (2008-2012).

### 2.1 Growth in Demand and a Committee on Higher Education (1945–1963)

Between the end of the Second World War and the publication of the *Robbins Report* (Committee on Higher Education, 1963) there was modest but proportionately significant expansion in higher education. Prior to 1945, the oldest institutions, The Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, had served an elite demographic of students predominantly from the most privileged backgrounds. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries civic universities in the main industrial cities, such as Liverpool, Manchester and Leeds emerged. The University Grants Committee (UGC) was also created in 1919 to advise on university funding

and places. Despite this early growth in higher education institutions, participation in Great Britain was estimated at just 2 per cent of 19 year olds in 1938 (Committee on Higher Education, 1963, p. 11).

It was not until *after* the Second World War that demand for graduates increased considerably, owing largely to Government policies for economic recovery, and a new emphasis on the welfare state and educational reform. The passage of the 1944 Education Act, following the 1943 White Paper, *Educational Reconstruction* (Board of Education, 1943), recommended secondary education up to age 15 as a right for all. As well as facilitating growth in the proportion of young people staying in education, the 1944 Act introduced the first national secondary education system in Great Britain. The Tripartite System required all 11 year olds to complete an exam, which would decide whether they went to Grammar or Secondary Modern School. Those achieving in the top 25 per cent typically went to Grammar School and others to Secondary Moderns. The Grammar Schools were primarily intended to prepare young people for higher education. There was also an option of sitting exams at age 12 or 13 to gain entry to Secondary Technical Schools, which specialised in vocational training, such as in engineering.

Alongside the school reforms and, as noted in the Introduction, the 1943 White Paper included a section on *Access to the Universities*, which had highlighted existing inequalities in the distribution of higher education places by social class (Board of Education, 1943). Access for the 'poorer scholar' was, therefore, an explicit policy concern towards the end of the Second World War. Once the war had concluded, a general election in July 1945 ushered in a Labour Government, replacing the Conservative Coalition. New economic measures and official policies, such as the *Barlow Report* (Barlow, 1946), aimed to boost economic productivity, particularly in science and technology. These initiatives extended the scope of policies that had been introduced by the Coalition towards the end of the war, which had, for example, promoted technical colleges to Institute of Technology status. Indeed, the Institutes of Technology were expected to foster much of the anticipated growth in science and technology.

During the post-war period Government looked increasingly to higher education to fulfil economic and civic functions, cultivating economic productivity,

intellectual debate *and* citizenship. The university as an entity of 'intellectual freedom and autonomy', however, remained a key principle (Shattock, 2012, p. 10). As growth continued steadily into the 1950s, the raising of the school-leaving age and introduction of the new school-leaving qualification in 1951 (the A-level), further increased demand for university places. The A-level replaced the Higher School Certificate (HSC), introduced in 1918, which tested students in several subjects and could only be awarded where exams in *all* subjects were passed. Conversely, the A-level assessed ability separately and in a smaller number of subjects. The new qualification was an important lever for opening up access to higher education, by increasing the number of school leavers with the required academic credentials. Indeed, since its introduction, the A-level has developed a unique 'academic' status as a 'royal route' into higher education in England, which continues today (David, 2010).

In tandem with the new school-leaving qualification, the Central Advisory Council recommended a further rise in the school leaving age to 16 in its *Education Report* of 1960 (Central Advisory Council, 1960). Whilst this change was not implemented until the early 1970s, the recommendation, along with the higher education policies of the early 1960s, set out a clearer Government intention for higher education expansion (Gordon et al, 1991; Tight, 2009). To support growth, the Anderson Committee Report, *Grants to Students* (Ministry of Education, 1960), recommended a national programme of student finance, in the form of a means-tested maintenance grant administered by local authorities. The grant opened up financial support to a wider range of students, facilitating access to higher education for those who could not have afforded to do so previously. From 1961 all students entering higher education received support with their tuition fees and maintenance.

To help administer the rapid increase in university applications, UCCA (the University Central Council on Admissions) was formed in 1961. Membership was voluntary, although the majority of English universities joined. The application process established by UCCA, now the University and Colleges Admissions System (UCAS), remains relatively unchanged today. Students applied to UCCA for six university places (now five) in one application. A copy of the application was sent to the relevant universities to make a decision on the offer of a place. Students

could accept two of these offers, a first (firm) choice and insurance (reserve) choice. The formation of UCCA not only marked the introduction of a national, standardised admissions system, but also foregrounded the commitment to yet further growth, soon formalised by the *Robbins Report* in 1963.

In the same year UCCA was established, Government commissioned the Committee on Higher Education, chaired by Lord Lionel Robbins, to review higher education provision in Great Britain. The Committee was tasked with defining the principles for higher education development in the long-term as a national 'system'. The final report defined the latter as 'a consciously co-ordinated organisation', which should be planned within a 'framework devised to promote harmonious evolution' (Committee on Higher Education, 1963, pp. 4-5). The Committee recommended that, to sustain the levels of expansion required for economic growth, the system should be made up of two component (binary) parts: universities and polytechnic colleges. Polytechnics brought together the Colleges of Advanced Technology specialising in science and technology. The idea of a binary system was not new and had been promoted amid the post-war efforts to cultivate 'scientific manpower' (Barlow, 1946). Although the Robbins Report suggested polytechnics could mature into universities, Shattock (2012) comments that promoting a university-polytechnic hierarchy served to 'reinforce and validate' the idea of the binary system (p. 55).

As for its review of existing provision, Robbins found the proportion of 19 year olds participating in full-time higher education had increased from 2 per cent in 1938 to some 7 per cent in 1962 (Committee on Higher Education, 1963, p. 11). Student numbers in all types of full-time higher education experienced an eight-fold increase between 1900 and 1963, and three-fold increase between 1938 and 1960.



**Table 2.1: Full-time Student Numbers in Great Britain 1900 - 1963**

Year	University	Teacher Training	Further Education	Total Full-time in HE	Percentage growth (%)
1900/01	20,000	5,000	-	25,000	-
1924/25	42,000	16,000	3,000	61,000	144.0
1938/39	50,000	13,000	6,000	69,000	13.1
1954/55	82,000	28,000	12,000	122,000	76.8
1962/63	118,000	55,000	43,000	216,000	77.0

Source: Committee on Higher Education, 1963, p. 15 (percentages have been added).

Although growth occurred in all areas of higher education between 1900 and 1963 it was most significant in teacher training and further education, where student numbers increased from just 5,000 to 55,000 (a 1000 per cent increase). Comparatively, growth in the universities was in the region of 500 per cent, increasing from 20,000 to 118,000 students. The education reforms of the 1940s and 1950s had boosted the supply of young people qualified for university entry, whilst creating new demand for qualified teachers. Expansion of the public sector and civil service alongside the gradual recovery of the economy also led to growth of the middle classes and new expectations amongst the wider public that more university places should become available. Furthermore, the post-war economic policies for growth in science and technology had driven up demand for higher-level courses in these disciplines. Robbins recommended this trajectory of growth should continue, and estimated that 390,000 higher education places should be available by 1973 and 560,000 by 1980 (Committee on Higher Education, 1963, p. 277).

Aside from growth, another important theme of the Robbins Report was *access*. The *Robbins Principle on Access* promoted entry to higher education based on achieved rather than ascribed status:

Throughout our Report we have assumed as an axiom that courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so (Committee on Higher Education, 1963, p. 8).

The Robbins Review re-oriented the principles underpinning the idea of higher education access. The Committee also defined the academic credentials granting access to the universities and training colleges:

Two passes at the Advanced level of the General Certificate of Education are the minimum qualification for entry to universities in England and Wales; at present over 80 per cent of the students have at least three. The minimum demanded for entry to Training Colleges is five passes at Ordinary level, but standards have risen sharply in recent years and 60 per cent of those who now enter have at least one pass at Advanced level and over a third have two passes or more. In further education virtually all the students have either one or more passes at Advanced level or an Ordinary National Certificate or Diploma, which are roughly equivalent to Advanced level (Committee on Higher Education, 1963, p. 17).

Robbins placed a new emphasis on meritocracy as a guiding principle for access, replacing privilege and family history of higher education participation with academic achievement. In this way, the Robbins Report served a functional and ideological purpose; it set out the role of higher education in the 'instruction of skills' and 'advancement of learning' but also established a new platform for the relationship between higher education and society (Committee on Higher Education, 1963, pp. 6-7):

Finally there is a function that is more difficult to describe concisely, but that is none the less fundamental: the transmission of a common culture and common standards of citizenship. We believe that it is a proper function of higher education, as of education in schools, to provide in partnership with the family that background of culture and social habit upon which a health society depends. This function, important at all times, is perhaps especially important in an age that has set for itself the ideal of equality of opportunity (Committee on Higher Education, 1963, p. 7).

As noted above, the idea of higher education as a social good was implicit to the Robbins Report. Alongside this, the tone for the emergent discourses advocating 'equality of opportunity' was also set.

## **2.2 Post-Robbins Growth and a Binary Policy (1964-1987)**

Although the forecasts presented in the Robbins Report were confronted with Government concerns for their affordability, within ten years the number of institutions and students had increased, albeit not as extensively as anticipated. Approximately 400,000 students were participating in all forms of full-time higher education in the UK by 1973 (Trow, 2006). In addition, nine 'green field'

universities had been built, ten Colleges of Advanced Technology had become universities and new polytechnics, managed by Local Education Authorities, had been created (Davies et al, 1997). Expansion of the polytechnics had accelerated after a speech in 1965 at Woolwich Polytechnic by Anthony Crosland, the Labour Secretary of State for Education and Science, who set out a policy intention for growth in the polytechnics to nurture opportunities for local, vocational higher education.

The inauguration of the Open University in 1969 marked another milestone for higher education during the post-Robbins period. The *University of the Air* White Paper of February 1966 culminated in the Open University being established to support distance learning on a larger scale. The Open University operated a policy of open access whereby academic qualifications were not typically required for entry. Although, initially, growth was slow, by 2013 over 240,000 students were enrolled on its courses (Open University, 2013). At the same time, and compounded by the demographic and economic changes of the late 1960s, the proportion of school leavers with two or more A-levels entering directly into permanent employment increased from 17 per cent to 22 per cent between 1966 and 1976. This shift established the conditions for cuts to state funding for higher education, and a new discourse of efficiency and rationalisation, which emerged following the election of a new Conservative Government in 1979 led by Margaret Thatcher (Shattock, 2012).

Despite reduction in state funding, higher education participation amongst the adult population was encouraged during the late 1970s, mainly through the development of *Access courses*. Access courses offered new routes into higher education for mature students who had not traditionally participated in higher education. The 'access movement', therefore, went some way to opening up higher education to a broader demographic (Davies et al, 1997; Tight, 2009). In tandem, the election of the Conservative Government had brought a new policy era aimed at bonding higher education more closely to the economy. Principles associated with economic freedom, namely competition and diversification, were promoted as the early phase of 'marketisation' discourses emerged (Williams, 1995). New policy narratives initiated a move away from the post-war focus on intensive Government support and the welfare state. This re-positioning of

Government discourse was formalised by the 1985 Green Paper *The Development of Higher Education into the 1990s* (DES, 1985), which anticipated only modest growth in line with demographic forecasts. Notwithstanding the new narratives on efficiency and rationalisation, moderate growth continued into the early 1980s, as demonstrated in Table 2.2.

**Table 2.2: Higher Education Institutions and Student Numbers in the UK 1983/84**

Institution Type	Number of Institutions	Full-time* HE students	Part-time HE students	Total HE students
Universities	53	301,000	36,000	337,000
Polytechnics	31	157,000	71,000	228,000
Scottish Central Institutions	14	14,000	1,000	15,000
Other Colleges (maintained)	411	79,000	125,000	203,000
Direct Grant/Voluntary	56	30,000	7,000	38,000
Open University	1	-	76,000	76,000
Total	566	581,000	316,000	897,000

Source: *The Development of Higher Education into the 1990s* (DES, 1985, p. 43).

\*Includes sandwich courses, which involve a period of time working in industry.

By 1983/84 there were 566 higher education institutions in the UK, a considerable leap from less than twenty before the two World Wars. Although the Robbins Report and the 1985 Green Paper were different in geographic coverage (comprising Great Britain and the UK respectively) a comparison of the data sets from the two documents indicates that full-time student numbers had more than doubled between 1962 and 1983, from 216,000 (in Great Britain) to 581,000 (in the UK). The primary concern of the 1985 Green Paper was to increase the supply of qualified scientists, engineers and technologists in order to sustain the national economy. As the polytechnics were expected to cultivate much of this growth, the national Polytechnics Central Admissions System (PCAS) was established in 1986 to manage applications. Indeed, expansion in student numbers continued throughout the post-Robbins period and, between 1962 and 1987, the participation rate doubled, rising to 14.6 per cent (National Committee, 1997; DES, 1991a, p. 41).

### **2.3 Mass expansion, a funding crisis and national inquiry into higher education (1988-1997)**

Amid continued financial concerns for the cost of growth, the Conservative Government looked to alternative models of higher education, particularly those underpinned by private investment. In addition, the undergraduate fee level was increased in 1990 along with a cut to the teaching grant to institutions. A student loan to supplement the maintenance grant was also introduced under the 1990 Education (Student Loans) Act (HMSO, 1990). Although the state continued to fund the undergraduate fee and teaching grant in full, these financial developments indicated the direction of travel for state support.

Soon afterwards, Government initiated considerable structural changes to higher education. Following the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, the binary system was abolished and 41 polytechnics and colleges subsequently became universities (Melville, 1998). The post-binary system provided the context for institutional competition and the rationale for a unified national admissions system. In 1993, UCAS was established, following the merger of UCCA and PCAS, while higher education institutions continued to operate autonomy over their selection practices. Other changes included the formation of a single Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and, for the first time, separate funding councils for Scotland and Wales. Despite some devolution, and with the onset of an anticipated funding crisis, undergraduate student quotas, in the form of Maximum Aggregate Student Numbers (MASN), were introduced in 1994/95 for each UK institution. In the same academic year, the HESA collected its first dataset. Alongside the funding cuts, several mergers had taken place, resulting in a drop in the number of institutions from 566 in 1983/84 to just 184 in 1994/95 (HESA, 1995).

As anxiety for the sustainability of higher education became more intense and imminent growth in the 18 year-old population was forecast, in 1996 the outgoing Conservative Government commissioned a National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, chaired by Lord Ronald Dearing. The *Dearing Committee* was asked to identify alternative student finance structures for higher education in the UK. In light of a reduction in funding per student of some 40 per cent yet a

doubling of student numbers across the previous 20 years, the Dearing Committee set out to identify more flexible funding models and projections for the next 20 years (National Committee, 1997). The vision for higher education was framed by objectives to further reduce costs, whilst maintaining (mass) participation rates.

The Dearing Committee recommended that higher education should expand to a participation rate of 45 per cent of young people in the next 20 years. Growth in mature, postgraduate and part-time places was also recommended.

Acknowledging the costs of sustaining this level of growth, Dearing opened up the question of *how* higher education should be funded and by *whom*. The final report included a section entitled 'who should pay' (National Committee, 1997, para 90-92) and, given the benefits of higher education to the individual, Dearing suggested it was reasonable for the cost to be shared between the state and student:

There is widespread recognition of the need for new sources of funding for higher education. The costs of higher education should be shared among those who benefit from it. We have concluded that those with higher education qualifications are the main beneficiaries, through improved employment prospects and pay. As a consequence, we suggest that graduates in work should make a greater contribution to the costs of higher education in future (National Committee, 1997, para 90).

Between 1988 and 1997 the participation rate more than doubled from 15 to 32 per cent (National Committee, 1997b, DES, 1991a, p. 41). The significance of this particular phase of growth is marked by the move from 'elite' to 'mass' status (Trow, 1974). By 1997 over 1.6 million students were participating in higher education, more than 1.1 million were in full-time or sandwich programmes, and over a half a million were studying part-time (owing largely to growth in mature student numbers). Some 200,000 students were also completing higher education programmes in further education colleges (National Committee, 1997a, para 3.6). Importantly, the Dearing Review laid the foundations for the next phase of growth, which would dovetail with the introduction of undergraduate tuition fees.

## **2.4 Post-Dearing renewed growth, cost sharing and near universal participation (1998-2007)**

Between 1998 and 2007 the new Labour Government, elected in May 1997, implemented the majority of the Dearing recommendations (DfEE, 1998a). It also set an ambitious target for a participation rate of 50 per cent amongst young people (aged 18-30) by 2010. Note, the definition of young people had changed from aged 18-21 to 18-30. Soon after the publication of the Dearing Report and the passage of the 1998 Teaching and Higher Education Act, the first tuition fees were introduced for new undergraduate students in 1998/99; a means tested annual charge of £1,000. Students from the lowest income families were exempt from payment whilst a new means tested maintenance loan for living costs also came into effect.

Despite the dilution of the notion of 'free higher education' (Scott, 1998, p. 4), demand for higher education continued to rise, with participation reaching 43 per cent of young people by 2003 (DfES, 2003). Further expansion of the middle classes and the better employment and income returns associated with a higher education degree represented an important driver for growing demand. In addition, a shift in economic policy towards the 'knowledge economy' and 'world class skills' had promoted new demand for graduates in the labour market. This shift in narrative was formalised by a national Review of Skills commissioned by Government in 2004 and chaired by Lord Alexander Leitch. The final report *Prosperity for all in the Global Economy: World Class Skills* (Leitch, 2006), The Leitch Review, recommended growth in the supply of higher-level skills to secure global competitiveness in the UK economy. Leitch suggested that, by 2020, at least 40 per cent of all adults should be qualified to Level 4 or above, where Level 4 equates to the first year of undergraduate study (Leitch, 2006, p. 3). This target accompanied recommendations for expansion in adult learning made in an earlier Green Paper dedicated to the idea of 'lifelong learning' (DfEE, 1998b).

The notion of cost sharing between the individual and the state confirmed the significance of marketisation and NPM discourses framing this wave of expansion (Brady, 2012; Brown and Carasso, 2013; Lynch, 2006; Mulderrig, 2012). The post-Dearing era was characterised by concerns for creating yet further efficiencies and

improvements to management structures, as well as establishing more competition between institutions. This era was also heavily influenced by Third Way discourses (Giddens, 1999, 2000). Tony Blair, the Labour Prime Minister from 1997 to 2007, was a key advocate of the Third Way. Blair presented Third Way principles as an alternative approach to capitalism and socialism, which he believed offered a space within which the values of economic liberalism and social justice could cohabit and, even, be mutually reinforcing.

Within these new discourses, several policy developments and new initiatives, which are explored further in the readings of the core texts, were introduced to open up opportunities for higher education. These developments included the roll out of a shorter two-year undergraduate degree. The Post-Dearing era was also characterised by important moments for policies and debate on education and equity. In 2000, media coverage of a high achieving student (Laura Spence) from a comprehensive school in the north of England who did not receive an offer from Oxford University after attending an interview intensified debates on equity and fairness. Much of the media coverage claimed that Laura Spence had not gained a place as she had been educated in a state school from a working-class area (Ryle et al, 2000). The New Labour Government was quick to exemplify the Laura Spence affair to strengthen its political discourse around fair access. The Laura Spence affair added further weight to the Government's widening participation agenda and, in turn, its objectives for expansion. The affair informed speeches by David Blunkett, as Secretary of State for Education and Employment, and Gordon Brown, as Labour Party Chancellor, in 2000, which called for 'equality of opportunity' and 'social justice' in higher education access (Blunkett, 2000; BBC News, 2000).

The events of 2000 also directed Government attention to admissions practices in higher education. The Government commissioned a review of higher education admissions, led by Professor Steven Schwartz, which published its final report *Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for Good Practice* in September 2004 (DfES, 2004). The report made several recommendations for ensuring transparency, fairness and consistency in admissions decisions. In addition, Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) was established in 2006, endorsed by HEFCE, UCAS and Universities UK (a representative body for higher



education institutions in the UK). SPA was tasked with promoting fair recruitment and selection practices through the dissemination of expert advice, best practice and sector-wide research, made available nationally to institutions and other stakeholders, such as UCAS.

The final years of the Post-Dearing era were marked by a further increase in the undergraduate tuition fee. The 2004 Higher Education Act sanctioned the introduction of variable fees capped at £3,000 per annum from September 2006. The 2004 Act also created the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), with the remit of administering Access Agreements for institutions opting to charge the new fee as well as working closely with Government and higher education institutions to promote 'fair access'. Access Agreements were a mechanism for higher education institutions to formalise their commitment to widening participation by setting out, in an institutional policy document, how this would be achieved. Despite concerns that passing more costs to the student would curtail demand, numbers continued to grow steadily. By 2008 the participation rate of 18-30 year olds in England had reached 46 per cent, just 4 percentage points away from the 2010 target (DBIS, 2013). By Trow's definition (1974), participation had reached near-universal levels.

## **2.5 New fees regime and the higher education market (2008-2012)**

The 2008-2012 period is a shorter era yet comprises significant developments for higher education in England. In support of the earlier Leitch recommendations, the 2008 Education and Skills Act approved the raising of the school leaving age to 17 in 2013 and 18 in 2015. The Act also introduced choice for young people in where they studied between the ages of 16 and 18. In 2009 the Labour Government appointed a special adviser on Social Mobility, Alan Milburn, a previous Labour Minister. Milburn subsequently published several Government reports on fair access to the professions, which focused on patterns of inequality and, specifically, the over-representation of those from privileged backgrounds in the 'elite' professions, such as law, medicine, banking and senior management in the civil services (Milburn, 2009, 2012a). In 2009 Government also published a 'framework' document for higher education. *Higher Ambitions: The Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy* (DBIS, 2009) restated concerns for the global competitiveness of the UK economy. The global financial crisis of 2008 and 2009,

and subsequent recession in the UK, created further appetite for growth in higher education, albeit within the constraints of limited state funding. As such, the Government continued to pursue its 50 per cent participation target.

Following the General Election in May 2010, a new Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government came to power. Before the General Election, the Labour Government had commissioned the Browne Committee, led by Lord John Browne, to propose a new, sustainable model for student finance in the context of the global recession. The continued need for higher-level skills in the economy and uncertainties over how supply could be financed acted as dual catalysts for the review. The Committee published its report, *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education* (Browne, 2010) in October 2010. Within a short time frame, the new Coalition Government took forward key recommendations of the *Browne Review* and the Higher Education Regulations, passed in December 2010, paved the way for a new fees regime in 2012/13.

The new regime meant that students, rather than the state, would pay the largest share of the tuition fee. A new capped undergraduate annual fee of £9,000 was introduced which, confronted with dwindling state funding, the majority of higher education institutions opted to charge from September 2012. In the same year, new fee loans were launched to complement the existing maintenance loans, adding to an increasingly complex system of student finance. Tuition fees would be repayable once graduates were earning £21,000 annually or more. In effect, Government were committing to covering tuition fees of low earning graduates, at least while they were earning below the threshold, whilst others (earning above the threshold) would be subject to repayment under terms comparable to a graduate tax.

The 2008-2012 period was shaped initially by Labour Government objectives for continued growth, whilst the latter half emphasised structural change. From September 2012 a new 'core/margin' funding model was introduced in England by HEFCE (DBIS, 2011a). Under the new system, the state would still fund 'core' numbers, represented by students achieving lower than AAB grades in three A-level subjects, or equivalent. Core numbers were expected to decrease year-on-year (DBIS, 2011a). Institutions were then encouraged to bid competitively for a

pre-determined set of margin places allocated on an annual basis by HEFCE. Any institutions exceeding their allocated core or margin numbers would be heavily fined. Quotas based on prior achievement were a completely new phenomenon and, to generate income from elsewhere, institutions would need to compete for the 'high achieving' students attaining grades of AAB or higher (DBIS, 2011a).

Despite successive increases in undergraduate tuition fees, growth continued during the 2008-2012 period. By 2011/12 the participation rate reached 49 per cent. Although this level fell to 43 per cent in 2012/13, Government attributed this to a temporary drop in the number of students deferring their entry in September 2011, in order to avoid paying higher fees the following year (DBIS, 2014b). Overall, and looking specifically at the nature of growth since 1945, considerably more students from middle-class and working-class backgrounds are now participating in higher education. However, Brown and Carasso (2013) note that the latter are still in the minority:

There have been huge increases in the numbers of part-time and mature students, and also in the numbers of students from ethnic minorities. There are many more working-class students than before, although they are still seriously under-represented; however, a greater proportion of the overall population is now 'middle class' (p. 6).

Furthermore, DBIS (2011a) reports that participation remains uneven in its distribution:

Currently fewer than one in five young people from the most disadvantaged areas enter higher education compared to more than one in two for the most advantaged areas. The participation rate of disadvantaged young people at institutions requiring higher entry tariffs has remained almost flat over recent years at under three per cent (DBIS, 2011a, p. 55).

Issues of justice and fairness within the patterns of distribution emerging during the main phases of mass expansion in England, therefore, provide an important context to the study.

## 2.6 Key moments for expansion and reform

As this chapter has demonstrated, higher education in England has undergone significant growth, development and reform since the Second World War. From a small number of elite and civic universities recruiting some 69,000 full-time students in 1938/39, largely from the upper and middle-upper classes (Committee on Higher Education, 1963, p. 15), by 2012, there was a near-universal, differentiated system comprising over 1.3 million full-time undergraduate students and almost 300,000 full-time postgraduate students (HESA, 2013). Several key milestones have shaped this development which, to conclude this chapter, are summarised in a timeline of important policy events, set out in Table 2.3. For completeness, the timeline includes two policy events preceding the 1987 White Paper (the 1985 Green Paper and introduction of the GCSE). The majority of events listed are featured in this chapter. Where specific events are relevant to the White Papers, they are considered further in the Texts and Readings chapters of the thesis.

**Table 2.3: Key Policy Events 1987-2012**

Year	Event
1985	Green Paper <i>The Development of Higher Education into the 1990s</i> .
1986	Introduction of General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE): compulsory school leaving certificate for ages 14-16, first awards in summer 1988. More students progressing to A-level, increased demand for higher education.
1987	<b>White Paper <i>Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge</i>:</b> Expansion and <i>widening access</i> to meet <i>manpower</i> needs to overcome the recession.
1988	Education Reform Act: Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PGFC) Universities Funding Council (UFC) Centralised funding and administration for polytechnics. National curriculum for primary and secondary schools.
1989	Speech by Secretary of State for Education and Science (Kenneth Baker). Vision for expansion of higher education, including privatisation.
1991	<b>White Paper <i>Higher Education: A New Framework</i>:</b> Reiteration of 1987 Access policies. Meeting manpower needs to strengthen economy.
1992	Further and Higher Education Act: Devolution of national funding and regulation. Creation of single funding council in England (HEFCE) and separate funding councils in Scotland and Wales.

Year	Event
1997	General Election: New Labour Government.
1997	The Dearing Report: Concern for future sustainability of higher education (idea of cost sharing between state and student) and <i>widening participation</i> introduced.
1998	<i>Higher education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Response to Dearing:</i> Commitment to link higher education more closely to the economy. Confirmation of which Dearing recommendations would be taken forward, including those around cost sharing and widening participation.
1998	Green paper <i>The Learning Age: a renaissance for a new Britain:</i> Consultation ended in July. Exploring ways to ensure access to higher education in later life.
1998	Tuition fees for undergraduate study introduced for first time in September
1999	Labour Party conference (Bournemouth): Target for 50% participation announced.
2000	Speech by David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education and Employment, at Greenwich University: Call for higher education to <i>widen participation</i> to promote <i>social inclusion</i> and <i>social justice</i> .
2000	Laura Spence affair: Highlights disparity between state and private school students progressing to the most selective institutions (Oxbridge). New energy for political debate on <i>widening participation</i> .
2003	<b>White Paper <i>The Future of Higher Education:</i></b> Recommendation for variable tuition fees and low-income grant. Target for 50% participation by 2010 target to <i>widen participation</i> . Access Agreements and recommendation for the creation of a new independent agency to monitor these Agreements.
2003	University of Bristol and contextual admissions: Rejection of high achieving students from private school sparks public reaction to affirmative action. Claims of 'social engineering'.
2004	Higher Education Act: Variable tuition fees and agreement for the creation of: Office for Fair Access, to monitor widening participation and Access Agreements, and Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA), to manage student complaints.
2004	Schwartz Review of Fair Admissions: Endorses the use of contextual data in admissions Recommends creation of national agency to provide expertise and guidance on admissions, to support best practice across the sector.
2006	Inauguration of Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA).
2006	New variable tuition fee introduced for undergraduate students starting in September.
2008	Government report <i>Getting on, getting ahead</i> First publication by Social Mobility Project in Cabinet Office Strategy Unit, focus on <i>fairness</i> .

Year	Event
	Education and Skills Act 2008: compulsory school leaving age raised to 17 from 2013 and 18 from 2015.
2009	General White Paper <i>New Opportunities. Fair Opportunities for the Future</i> Pan-department commitment to <i>fair opportunities</i> and <i>social mobility</i> .
2009	Framework Document <i>Higher Ambitions: The Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy</i> : First official publication of the new Department for Business, Innovation & Skills under leadership of Peter Mandelson: Endorses <i>widening participation</i> , <i>fairer access</i> and contextual admissions.
2009	<i>Unleashing Aspiration: The Final Report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions</i> First report from the Panel, led by Alan Milburn as Government adviser on social mobility.
2010	Final report of postgraduate review led by Professor Adrian Smith <i>One step beyond: making the most of postgraduate education</i> : Identified need for robust data on participation in postgraduate study. Concerns for barriers to postgraduate study in light of undergraduate tuition fee increase.
2010	General Election: New Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government.
2010	Final report of the <i>Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance (The Browne Review)</i> : Recommendation to pass cost of higher education to the student.
2011	Letter from DBIS (David Willetts and Vince Cable) to the Director for Fair Access (Sir Martin Harris): New guidance for monitoring Access Agreements. Recommendation for wider take up of contextual admissions.
2011	<i>Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers: A Strategy for Social Mobility</i> : First strategy devoted to social mobility published by the Cabinet Office under the direction of Nick Clegg.
2011	<b>White Paper <i>Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System</i></b> New fees regime and new cap on undergraduate tuition fees of £6000 per annum. Core/margin student number controls. Endorses contextual admissions and targeted outreach schemes recognised at admission.
2012	Inauguration of Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, led by Alan Milburn.
2012	New fees regime and core/margin student number controls introduced in 2012/13.
2012	Speech by Vince Cable to Parliament <i>Supporting social mobility and lifelong learning</i> : reiterates Government emphasis on <i>relative mobility</i> . Publication of report by Alan Milburn <i>University Challenge: How Higher Education Can Advance Social Mobility</i> .

## 3. Research Questions

### Introduction

One of the most significant observations from Chapters 1 and 2 is that, despite mass expansion of higher education in England, patterns of under-representation and inequality have persisted. Growth has not been uniform, balanced or consistently planned. The analysis will consider how access-participation-mobility feature in the key policy moments during which English higher education accelerated from elite, to mass, to near-universal participation levels.

The first two chapters provided an overview of the literature, concepts and key events surrounding the expansion of higher education in England since the Second World War. Based on the themes identified, notions of access-participation-mobility and their representation in the four successive higher education White Papers published between 1987 and 2012 are explored through an analytical, discursive and chronological review of each text. Based on these objectives, the readings of the core texts consider how expressions of access-participation-mobility have evolved *and* which narratives have remained consistent over-time. As such, the analysis of the readings and the main findings are framed by the following principal research question and three supplementary research questions.

### 3.1 Principal research question

How have the concepts of access, participation and mobility been represented in official policy texts on higher education in England between 1987 and 2012?

#### 3.1.1 Supplementary research questions

1. What is the content and character of access-participation-mobility as sets of ideas in official policy texts?
2. Have expressions of access-participation-mobility in official policy texts changed over time? If so, how?
3. How do access-participation-mobility discourses interact with other discourses in the chosen texts?

## 4. Methodology, Methods and Text

### Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework for the study and the chosen research methods. The study is a concept-led interpretive documentary review informed by critical policy and critical discourse analysis approaches. The four higher education White Papers published between 1987 and 2012 represent the core texts, and main subjects of analysis, of the study. To further define the approach of the thesis, this chapter is organised around two sections, the first capturing the chosen *Methodology* and the second describing the *Research Methods* and approach to the *Readings of the Texts*.

### 4.1 Methodology

Methodology is understood here as the theoretical and reflective justification of the research decisions and chosen approaches to obtaining knowledge (Clough and Nutbrown, 2002; Sikes, 2004). When thinking about theory and methodology it is important to acknowledge the value-laden nature of the research decisions and the ways in which they embody researcher positionality, in particular their assumptions, values and moral judgements. The research decisions and outcomes subsequently reflect the researcher's assumptions about the social world around us (ontology) and how knowledge is acquired (epistemology). The chosen methodology also shapes important decisions about the research methods, providing the structure within which the study is undertaken (Wellington et al, 2005). The epistemological and ontological foundations of this study are inter-related and align themselves respectively with interpretive methodologies and social constructivist perspectives. Firstly, the study acknowledges that understandings, representations and interpretations of social reality are plural in nature. Secondly, social reality is recognised as a human construct, inherently related to context, be that social, cultural, historical, economic or political.

#### 4.1.1 Critical policy analysis and policy sociology

Critical policy analysis and policy sociology provide the first methodological layer to the study. Research in these fields attempts to understand education policy through the lens of different sociological concepts and ideas. Importantly, critical



policy analysis studies define policy as a socially embedded practice (Ball, 2010; Lingard and Sellar, 2013). Taking account of the extensive range of critical policy analysis methodologies, the study is primarily concerned with understanding how the relationships between higher education and society are represented and, specifically, in connection with the concepts of access, participation and mobility. The idea that education policy embodies Government concerns for equity, particularly around 'participation, inclusion and interests', is highly relevant here (Cohen et al, 2011, p. 31). To explore these issues further, the study acknowledges the notion of policy as 'text' (Ball, 1993), as a representation of specific 'knowledge and belief systems' (Fairclough, 1995, p. 6). Understanding policy as text recognises the 'messy', 'ambiguous' and 'contradictory' nature of policy and the role values have in shaping these characteristics (Ball, 2010; Henry, 1993). Values can be described here as 'an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct is personally or socially preferable' (Rokeach, 1973, p. 5).

Although policy is a rather 'fuzzy' concept that can be problematic to define (Ball, 1993), for the purpose of the study it is understood as a statement of intention and, regarding national policy, a reflection of Government objectives and priorities. Given the scope of the study, national policy is the specific area of interest, although it is acknowledged that policy also exists at the local, institutional and global levels. As for linguistic considerations, the term *policy* originates from the Latin *polis* family, meaning city-state or citizenship, which, it is suggested, highlights its relationship with power, and historic connections with 'social control and regulation' (Torgerson, 2003, p. 113). As noted in the earlier chapters, the study acknowledges how policy can embody forms of social power, by reproducing patterns of influence or subordination in society, and prioritising specific ideas (over others) about how society should work and, moreover, how it might be improved.

Prunty (1985) suggests that one of the key objectives of social and educational policy is to realise some form of 'social ideal', through the resolution of 'real or potential barriers to social progress' (p. 136). As such, the study is interested in exploring whether and, if so, how, expressions of access-participation-mobility in the core texts contribute towards the representation and justification of specific

ideas, or sets of ideas, about society. Indeed, ideas about how society might be improved are varied, subjective and context-dependent:

Policies are very specific and practical regimes of truth and value and the ways in which policies are spoken and spoken about, their vocabularies, are part of the creation of their conditions of acceptance and enactment (Ball, 2010, p. 5).

Thinking about policy as a situated reflection of specific beliefs, values and power relations helps to engage with the dominant ideas, or discourses, framing them. Acknowledging the connection between policy and discourse is also an important rationale for combining a critical policy and critical discourse approach in the study.

#### **4.1.2 Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis**

Discourse is a contested term featuring in a range of research disciplines, including social theory and critical linguistics. The study aligns itself with the notion that discourse is a 'frame of reference gathering together particular ideas and concepts' (Van den Brink and Metze, 2006, p. 15). In this sense, policy can be understood not just as text (a situated, social practice and process), but also as a representation of discourse (embodying key ideas and concepts). At its broadest, discourse offers a structure for exploring and organising the contexts and sets of ideas underpinning the expression(s) of access-participation-mobility in the chosen texts.

Although the scope of this study does not extend to a detailed examination of the various interpretations of discourse, Rogers (2004a) suggests that the different methodologies and methods of discourse analysis can be organised along a continuum of linguistic and social approaches. Linguistic approaches characterise language as the 'privileged choices that meaning makers (language users) as agents have in making decisions about the social functions of their language use' (p. 6). Linguistic methods focus primarily on deconstructing structural and grammatical features of texts to examine how they contribute towards its overall structure and meaning. Whilst linguistic approaches are by no means homogenous, the early work of Harris (1952) was influential in situating the

language used in texts within its broader culture and seeking to uncover ‘not only what but *how* it is being said’ (p. 1).

Social approaches to discourse analysis are equally diverse but are influenced by social theorists and socio-linguists, such as Foucault (1994a, 1994b) and Halliday (1978). Here, language is understood as a product of social processes and practices (Mayr, 2008). Social approaches focus on the capacity of language to shape knowledge. For example, Foucault (1994b) describes discourse as ‘a certain way of speaking invested in a system of prohibitions, exclusions, limitations, freedoms and values’ (p. 193). Examining discourse can help to determine what is and is *not* included, and *how*. In other words, what is present but also what is *silent* and how these features shape specific articulations of social reality, which can include policy concerns for equality. Social approaches also emphasise how discourse, as a dominant set of ideas, establishes itself, or becomes ‘naturalised’, in text and, as such, specific policy concerns can take on a ‘common sense’ character, requiring minimal explanation or justification (Fairclough, 1995, p. 82). The study, therefore, explores what *policy work* notions of access-participation-mobility might undertake to justify specific Government reforms or ideas.

Returning to the continuum of linguistic and social approaches to critical discourse analysis (Rogers, 2004a), the study adopts a social approach in order to examine the key themes and concepts represented in the core texts. The thematic, concept-led social approach acknowledges the politically and historically embedded nature of texts and draws on the notion of ‘epistemes’ (Foucault, 1994b). Hyatt (2005) suggests that epistemes help to describe the socio-cultural context and dominant values in any given period, or era, including the assumptions about how society and, not least, its education systems, should be organised. Examining dominant ideas can, therefore, shed light on how Government understands society and its component parts, including education. The analysis is interested in how the policies and the language used to articulate them, in the form of common themes, policy motifs and idioms associated with equity, serve to rationalise and/or emphasise specific aspects of reform.

Within this social, thematic approach policy is understood as a *process* and, as such, an outcome of struggles and tensions between different and, sometimes,

competing sets of ideas (Taylor, 1997). These different sets of ideas can often rest on different understandings of the social purpose of education (Bowe et al, 1992). The analysis is alert to these struggles and, subsequently, looks for evidence of convergent and divergent ideas within and across the policy documents. As well as locating the study on the continuum of discourse analysis, it is also important to situate the study in its specific phase in the 'policy cycle', which Bowe et al (1992) suggest can be organised around three stages or 'contexts'. These are contexts of: 'influence', where discourses are *constructed*; 'production', when policy is *represented* in official documents, such as Green Papers and White Papers; and 'practice', when policies are *implemented* (p. 20). While the importance of each policy stage, and the inter-relationships between them is acknowledged, the focus of the study is on the policy documents themselves, as produced texts. The analysis is, therefore, interested in the text publication phase (context of 'production').

In the spirit of transparency about my research decisions, I initially considered combining the documentary analysis with a small number of stakeholder interviews, including relevant Ministers and Civil Servants involved in the creation of the four White Papers. Whilst planning the early stages of the research it soon became evident that I was drawn by the need to fully understand the policy documents through a detailed, extensive and substantial critical account of the texts and how they *represented* the issues under investigation. This phase was a significant moment in the research design process. Whilst there were pragmatic considerations to the decisions made, the overriding factors were methodological. Ultimately, I felt that attempting to combine the two elements of research within the chosen time period might underplay one of the phases of the policy cycle and would limit the scope for an in-depth and comprehensive analysis of the texts. The decision to focus on a documentary analysis was also a response to the relatively limited amount of research concentrating exclusively on policy texts, and the objective to fully understand how these four White Papers had framed policy concerns for equity.

#### **4.1.3 Concepts and condensation symbols**

The three concepts of access-participation-mobility provide the main themes for analysis. The study recognises the evolutionary nature of social concepts and, as

such, explores the 'career' of each of the three concepts (Carver, 1995), namely how have they featured in the texts, if at all, and how they have evolved. In a similar way, the study adopts the notion of 'conceptual history' to examine the development of the concepts, their history and the extent to which their articulation(s) may have changed (Palonen, 2002). In this way, Cohen et al (2011) note that historical documentary analysis in the field of education can provide valuable 'insights into the past and origins of the present, including processes of change and continuity over time' (p. 248). It is important to reiterate here that access-participation-mobility are distinct yet, like all sociological concepts, open to different interpretation(s), not least by those researchers analysing them. Care is taken to minimise the risk of an ahistorical approach, which projects contemporary ideas and values onto the previous eras under analysis. As such, the decision to examine the three concepts, rather than just one in isolation, was intended to facilitate a more holistic account of change in key narratives during the twenty-five year period. Bearing in mind the complex and messy nature of policy, the study also seeks to avoid implying any linear or static relationships within or across the three concepts.

To support the thematic approach, the notion of 'condensation symbols', researched extensively by Murray Edelman (1964) and Doris Graber (1976), provides another lens for examining the three concepts. Edelman and Graber subscribe to the idea of political symbolism and suggest that condensation symbols create meaning by condensing several ideas or concepts into short, succinct words or phrases (or symbols). Graber (1976) describes condensation symbols as 'mental shorthand'; an efficient means of political communication distilling complex political ideas and concepts into specific language or terminology for wider consumption. Examples include *democracy*, *justice*, and *opportunity*. Duncan (1968) suggests that the use of condensation symbols can promote social cohesion and incite political support as they appeal to, and reinforce, widely held values, concerns and interests in any particular era. The ambiguity of condensation symbols is thought to play an important role in abbreviating, and often simplifying, complex and, sometimes, contentious social issues (Troyna and Williams, 1986; Edelman, 1977). The study is interested in whether access, participation or mobility fulfil a condensation function, to further assess the policy work these concepts might perform in the core texts.

## 4.2 Research methods and text

Within the methodological framework set out above, the research methods can be described as the 'techniques used to collect and analyse the data' (Sikes, 2004, p. 16). The main research method of the study is a text-led, conceptual and thematic documentary review. To align with the methodology, an interpretive approach provides the context for identifying and analysing the main themes and sets of ideas that construct notions of access-participation-mobility in the policy documents. As Wellington (2008) notes, interpretive methods help to unpeel the constructed nature of social reality and of the research process itself. The decision to use policy texts as the units of analysis also acknowledges the idea that documents can be examined systematically as a social product and legitimate object for social research (Wellington, 2008; Scott, 1990).

The genre and main corpus of texts examined in the thesis comprise the four Government White Papers published on Higher Education in England between 1987 and 2012. Of note, the geographic coverage of these policies has changed during the period as official policy has become increasingly devolved across the UK nations. White Papers have been chosen on the basis that they are a genuine example of 'official' policy documents translating Government policy proposals and intentions, anticipating legislative change and reform (Scott, 1990, p. 19). As Mulderrig (2012) notes:

It [the White Paper] is the main vehicle by which the government formally communicates its policy intentions to the wider public and the various stakeholders in that policy arena. Its communicative purpose is both expository and hortatory: these documents outline, explain and justify the government's plans for legislation (p. 706).

White Papers are, therefore, a key feature of political and legislative processes for education reform in England. As 'published statements of government policy' (Rogers and Walters, 2004, p. 415), White Papers have been used by the British Government to make legislative proposals around issues of social policy and concern for the last century. Traditionally, although not exclusively, White Papers have been published after a Green Paper. The Green Paper is consultative in nature, designed to collect feedback from stakeholders on proposed developments and reforms. The White Paper informs a legal Bill which, before

being passed, must be formally reviewed through the Houses of Commons and Lords. Given the importance of the White Paper in political and legislative proceedings, the chosen texts are considered to provide a representative set of the highest order policy documentation informing higher education development in the 1987-2012 period. Notwithstanding the common characteristics of the White Paper, the study is interested in whether the nature of the White Papers has changed over time. Moreover, whether change reflects different political eras during the twenty-five years.

The four core texts are listed in the following table, alongside details of the Government administration, department, Prime Minister and relevant Minister for each White Paper. When identifying the texts, the decision was made not to include the *Higher Ambitions* paper published by DBIS in December 2009 (DBIS, 2009). Given the forthcoming General Election the following May, *Higher Ambitions* could not recommend major reform. Instead, it marked the newly created Government department (DBIS) and the appointment of its lead Minister, Peter Mandelson. Some describe the 2009 report as a White Paper (Brown and Carasso, 2013). However, the Labour Government presented it as a 'framework' document setting out a 'strategy' for continued stability in the higher education system within an increasingly competitive global market for skills (DBIS, 2009, p. 3, p. 8). The 2009 framework document did not, therefore, lead to legislative change for the reform of higher education in England.

**Table 4.1: Core texts**

<b>Year</b>	<b>White Paper</b>	<b>Government Department</b>	<b>Government</b>	<b>Prime Minister</b>	<b>Relevant Minister(s), Title</b>
<b>1987</b>	<b>Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge</b>	Department for Education and Science (DES)	Conservative	Margaret Thatcher	Kenneth Baker, Secretary of State for Education and Science
<b>1991</b>	<b>Higher Education: A New Framework</b>	Department for Education and Science (DES)	Conservative	John Major	Kenneth Clarke, Secretary of State for Education and Science
<b>2003</b>	<b>The Future of Higher Education</b>	Department for Education and Skills (DfES)	Labour ( <i>New Labour</i> )	Tony Blair	Charles Clarke, Secretary of State for Education and Skills
<b>2011</b>	<b>Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System</b>	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS)	Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition	David Cameron (Conservative)	David Willetts (Conservative), Minister of State for Universities and Science, Vince Cable (Liberal Democrat), Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills



To set the White Papers in context, political leadership is an important consideration, given the extent to which Governments and Lead Ministers inform the content and emphasis of policy. The political spectrum in England is typically defined by left- to right- wing positions. The left has historically favoured state intervention, the re-distribution of wealth in society, and equality of opportunity. It also advocates the welfare state, including the idea of free public healthcare and education. Alternatively, right-wing positions have typically promoted notions of economic freedom and align themselves with the principle of 'survival of the fittest'. They do not tend to support the idea of state intervention or regulation for equality. In England, the main political parties comprise of Labour (traditionally left-wing), Conservative (traditionally right-wing), and the Liberal Democrats (centre-left). It is worth noting, however, that the differentiation of left- and right-wing parties is becoming increasingly blurred, nuanced and complex in current political debate in England, as the main parties converge towards more centrist positions. This shift may, indeed, have a bearing on narratives of change and continuity across the different policy eras under investigation.

#### **4.2.1 Readings of the core texts**

The question of *how* the documents should be interpreted is central to the research design of the study. As Cohen et al (2011) note, 'documents do not speak for themselves but require careful analysis and interpretation' (p. 253). There are many techniques for approaching documentary analysis, however the study follows a qualitative approach to the thematic analysis, as supported by Scott (1990):

There is no single, widely accepted theory for the measurement of meaning... Measurement should be understood to refer to the processes of coding and classifying source material into the theoretically defined categories required for the researcher's purpose. Measurement is not always a quantitative procedure (p. 9).

By employing a qualitative approach, the assumptions and ideas upon which the policies are founded can also be examined (Codd, 1988). To facilitate a detailed analysis of each document, the readings of each White Paper are presented separately, in their own chapter. These readings are followed by an analysis of the

concepts *across* the White Papers as part of the discussion and analysis of the thesis, to draw out patterns of continuity and change in the expressions of access-participation-mobility. Specifically, the analysis of each document is organised around three main strands:

- Situating the core texts in their socio-political and economic environs.
- Exploring *how* the core texts construct and represent the concepts of access-participation-mobility.
- Considering how the articulations of access-participation-mobility interact with other key policies and themes in the documents.

The readings of the White Papers are guided by a framework put forward by Hyatt (2013) for the critical discourse analysis of policy, which involves ‘contextualising’ and ‘deconstructing’ texts. The contextualisation of the texts in the study also follows advice from Mayr (2008) that, to fully and critically interpret texts, ‘we must work out what the writer is *doing* through discourse, and how this *doing* is linked to wider interpersonal, institutional, socio-cultural and material contexts’ (p. 7). Hyatt (2005) recommends a consideration of the ‘immediate’ and ‘medium-term’ socio-political contexts, to highlight the issues of concern, or ‘hot topics’, as well as seeking evidence of any longstanding, or broadly accepted narratives (meta-narratives) and discourses. The process of contextualising the White Papers also considers related policy (second order) texts. Incorporating related texts can facilitate an inter-textual approach, to identify common themes, discourses and concepts of the policy era. Furthermore, an inter-textual approach can help mitigate against distortion, by providing a more balanced, triangulated perspective of the core texts (Hyatt, 2005).

To ensure the second order texts are relevant to the scope of the study, their identification applies Scott’s guidance (1990) for selecting documentary sources based on ‘authenticity’ (whether the document is ‘genuine’), ‘credibility’ (accuracy and extent to which content has been manipulated), ‘representativeness’ (whether it is illustrative of the chosen corpus of texts), and ‘meaning’ (the scope for ‘literal and interpretive’ understandings) (pp. 22-28). To ensure relevance and authenticity to the core texts, the second order texts are limited to other official Government documents referenced within the White

Papers themselves or published during the same period. They include Government reports, strategies and speeches. Consideration of the second order texts *supports* the more detailed analysis of the core texts. As such, the review of the supplementary documents is not as extensive or in-depth as that of the White Papers.

The deconstruction of the texts is aimed at understanding *how* the documents *represent* (construct) access-participation-mobility. A detailed reading of each core text highlights which concepts feature in each White Paper, to what extent, and whether the concepts are presented under different guises or in relation to other, similar concepts. The aim here is to identify evidence of the ideas shaping the articulations of access-participation-mobility within each document and, then, to illustrate how the narratives associated with these notions have developed during the twenty-five year period. Consideration is also given to what the policy expressions of access-participation-mobility might reveal of the broader sets of ideas about higher education, society and the economy during each era.

To support the deconstruction of the texts, the analysis includes a high level consideration of genre. Here, genre includes grammatical characteristics, such as collective pronoun use (e.g. 'we' or 'us'), or metaphor use and active/passive voice (Rogers, 2004b, p. 56). The analysis is interested in how these features contribute to the overall construction of the three concepts in the White Papers. Examining whether genre has changed over time is also important to considering how the framing of access-participation-mobility has evolved, and whether the nature and character of the White Paper is significant to this framing. Exploring genre also assists in evaluating how the policy themes, namely the chosen policy motifs relating to access-participation-mobility, serve to reproduce, reinforce or prioritise specific ideas concerning equity. The notion of condensation symbols is used here as a lens for considering whether specific language or phrases are used to construct and rationalise particular understandings of higher education and its role in society.

The analysis also identifies the drivers, levers and warrant underpinning the access-participation-mobility policies in the White Papers. Policy drivers can be defined as 'cues to action by those managing and delivering public services; they

provide the framework within which policy levers are developed and implemented' (Steer et al 2007, p. 177). Drivers are the conditions or catalysts for action underpinning the main policies and might include macro-economic conditions, such as an economic boom or recession. Policy levers are the suggested mechanisms through which the policies are to be implemented. A consideration of drivers and levers builds on the contextualisation and deconstruction of the White Papers to illustrate the main purpose and key objectives of the four documents. In turn, this helps to situate the policies on access-participation-mobility within the documents as a whole, and within the suite of reforms they present.

Cochran-Smith and Fries (2001) suggest that examining warrant reveals the ways in which the policies are legitimated and, as a result, helps to identify underlying 'ideals, ideologies and values' (p. 13). They define three types of warrant: 'evidentiary warrant', the evidence presented to justify and explain the policy goals; 'political warrant', whether the policy legitimates its aims by describing them in relation to the interests of public good; and 'accountability warrant', how the anticipated outcomes are used to legitimate the policy aims and levers. The analysis draws on the notion of warrant to further understand how the policies on access-participation-mobility are rationalised and whether their justification relates to other reforms set out in the core texts. In this way, the level of importance attached to the policies on access-participation-mobility and to the other policies in the documents provide further insight into understanding how issues of equity are represented.

#### **4.3 Positionality and ethics**

There are specific considerations for positionality and ethics within a critical policy and critical discourse analysis methodology. In particular, values are not just evident in policy-making but are also present in its analysis and interpretation. As Henry (1993) illustrates:

Policy analysis is not only about the workings of policy and their deeper agendas. It is also a value-laden activity which explicitly or implicitly makes judgements as to whether and in what ways policies help to 'make things better' – acknowledging of course the contested nature of these judgements (p. 104).

*How* policy is analysed implicitly involves the values and judgements of the researcher. Although Prunty (1985) suggests the task of educational policy analysis is 'far from a neutral and objective activity' (p. 135), this does not imply that the research process must attempt to be value-free. The research should, however, seek to be as reflexive and reflective as possible. Wellington (2008) describes a reflective approach as 'thinking critically' about the research process, including the methods and their justification, and considering how things might have been done differently. A reflexive approach is about 'reflecting on the self' as an active part of the research endeavour (p.42). Being reflective and reflexive, therefore, means acknowledging and being critical about positionality and its influence on the research process.

Sikes (2004) suggests that adopting a reflective and reflexive approach is integral to ethical and well-balanced educational research. Similarly, Prunty (1985) calls on educational researchers to approach critical policy analysis from a 'moral and ethical stance' (pp. 135-136). I will interpret ethical here as being transparent about my own values and assumptions. In this spirit, it is important to acknowledge my own professional background and experience of working in higher education administration, in particular in an admissions office of a Russell Group institution. My professional role is informed by national policy, including that concerning access-participation-mobility, and has undoubtedly informed my choice of research topic and my decisions about methodology and methods.

As Carr (2000) suggests, the research should align itself with 'normative educational theory or theories' and be explicit about these choices in order for the research to be meaningful and relevant (p. 441). In doing so, I recognise that the approach set out in this chapter is not the only way this topic might be examined. Moreover, the perspectives shaping the critical analysis and interpretation will be informed by my own professional experience. In this respect, the analysis is mindful of the aim 'not to prove which of the plural readings [of a critical policy analysis] is correct but to consider them all as evidence of the text's inherent ambiguities, distortions and absences' (Codd, 1988, p. 246).

The discussion of the main findings and reflection on the research process is informed, throughout, by an evaluation of the credibility of the research. Guba and Lincoln's criteria for 'trustworthiness' (1985) are a valuable guiding principle here, which defines four criteria of trustworthiness for qualitative and interpretive research. They include: 'credibility', confidence in the findings; 'transferability', demonstrating that the findings can be applied to other contexts; 'dependability', showing the potential for consistency should the research be replicated; and 'confirmability', illustrating the degree to which the findings are informed by the research and not just an outcome of researcher interests and values (p. 300). This framework is a key reference point for the study and is employed across the research process as part of a critically reflective and reflexive approach.

#### **4.4 Summary**

The thesis combines a policy sociology methodology with a critical policy and critical discourse analysis approach. The study is text-led and the analysis is thematic, conceptual and interpretive in nature, focusing on the expression(s) of access-participation-mobility within and across four successive higher education White Papers published between 1987 and 2012. Official policy as produced text (published documents), set within their socio-political, economic and historic contexts are the focal point of the study against which the ideas shaping policies on access-participation-mobility and the broader narratives to which they are aligned are examined.

# TEXTS AND READINGS

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## 5. Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge (1987)

### Introduction

This chapter explores how the 1987 White Paper represents access-participation-mobility. The readings of the text look for both explicit and implicit references to these concepts. As noted in Chapter 1, although access, participation and mobility constitute relatively discreet concepts and bodies of literature, there are connections between the wider narratives and contexts to which they are associated. As such, the analysis of the 1987 White Paper, and following three White Papers, presents evidence of whether and, if so, *how* the concepts are expressed as specific policy motifs, whilst illustrating any linkages made between them, their underpinning ideas and the other policies presented in the documents.

### 5.1 The 1987 White Paper in context

*Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge* was published in April 1987 by the Department of Education and Science under the direction of the Thatcher-led Conservative Government (DES, 1987). At the end of the Labour Government, the winter of discontent in 1978-79 brought industrial unrest, widespread power cuts and a series of national strikes amid a deep economic recession and high unemployment. Following the General Election in May 1979, the new Conservative Government placed neo-liberal economic policies of privatisation, rationalisation and efficiency high on the agenda. Discourses of NPM and the New Right framed emerging policy concerns for management, performance indicators and quality. Despite rapid expansion of the economy by the mid 1980s these discourses had gathered further pace by 1987.

The 1985 Green Paper, *Development of Higher Education into the 1990s* (DES, 1985), is significant to the policy context of *Meeting the Challenge*. This Paper was largely interested in creating closer links between higher education and the

economy, to stimulate the supply of highly skilled 'manpower' and, thus, increase national productivity. The demographic context, namely the forecast drop in the 18-19 year-old population, was another key driver for focussing on the economy. Notably, the Green Paper proposed higher education growth in economically important disciplines, such as science, engineering and technology:

The economic performance of the United Kingdom since 1945 has been disappointing compared to the achievement of others. The Government believes that it is vital for our higher education to contribute more effectively to the improvement of the performance of the economy. This is not because the Government places a low value on the general cultural benefits of education and research. Nor does it place a low value on the study of the humanities which, provided high academic standards are applied, enriches the lives of students, helps to set the moral and social framework for our society, and prepares students well for many types of employment. The reason is simply that, unless the country's economic performance improves, we shall be even less able than now to afford many of the things that we value most – including education for pleasure and general culture and the financing of scholarships and research as an end in itself (DES, 1985, p. 3).

Whilst the Green Paper acknowledged the civic function of higher education, economic priorities took the lead. Protecting the competitive position of the UK vis-à-vis other developed nations presented a persuasive case for (modest) expansion of higher education. In doing so, the Green Paper not only set the policy scene for *Meeting the Challenge*, but also the tone for its policies on access and participation. Indeed, policy concerns for demographic change and skills shortages were carried forward as two key drivers for the 1987 White Paper.

In addition to the 1985 Green Paper, *Meeting the Challenge* was also foregrounded by a Government paper published in November 1986, which presented projections for higher education development in the UK over the subsequent 14 years. *Projections of demand for higher education in Great Britain 1986-2000* (DES, 1986) included two models, both forecasting limited growth in overall student numbers until the end of the decade, followed by varying degrees of decrease until 1996 (when the age 18-19 population was expected to drop), then followed by a period of moderate growth. The first set of projections were based on an increase from 693,000 in 1985 to 633,000 in 2000, while the second



set anticipated growth to 723,000 by 2000. The difference in the projections reflected different assumptions about how quickly numbers would recover after the demographic downturn. The 1986 projections report included detailed tables and graphs of forecasts across a range of groups, including part-time, mature and overseas students. Estimated participation levels in 1986 were, in Trow's terms (1974), still of elite status; some 14.2 per cent of 18-19 year olds were participating in higher education. This represented an increase of almost 3 percentage points since the change in Government in 1979 (DES, 1987, p. 3). The 1987 White Paper aligned its forecasts with the 1986 projections and anticipated a modest 5 per cent growth in student numbers between 1985 and 1990, followed by a return to existing levels during the demographic dip, then a period of 'renewed growth' (DES, 1987, p. 9).

The Croham Report (Croham, 1987), also features amongst the official policies preceding *Meeting the Challenge*. In April 1986 the Conservative Government tasked Lord Douglas Croham with chairing a group to review the University Grants Committee (UGC) and identify alternative models for allocating resources to the universities. The report, published in February 1987, is referenced in the 1987 White Paper. Indeed, one of its key policies was the recommendation to disband the UGC and form a new national Universities Funding Council. The policy context of *Meeting the Challenge* was, therefore, heavily informed by Government objectives to direct the future structure, governance and funding of higher education, within an emergent discourses of institutional competition and value for money.

Alongside the official policies and reports shaping the technocratic reforms of *Meeting the Challenge*, are two other texts, which bear specifically on the 1987 policies on access and participation. The first was an academic paper exploring the relationships between entry qualifications and social class backgrounds of undergraduate students by Ernest Rudd (1987). The second was a report, due for imminent publication when the White Paper was released, summarising the results of a Government commissioned survey of young people and their intentions to apply to higher education, led by Bob Redpath and Barbara Harvey (1987). The White Paper notes that these two pieces of research had informed the assumptions upon which the projections for future demand were based. In

addition, the reference to these studies implied an acknowledgement by Government of the socio-economic factors (in this case, parental education and social class) influencing patterns of inequality in higher education participation in the UK.

## 5.2 Genre, scope and aims

The 1987 White Paper document comprises 46 pages in a technical report style written almost exclusively in the third person. The geographic coverage is the United Kingdom in its entirety, as evidenced by the signatures in the introduction of the relevant secretaries of state for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The brevity and formality of the document result in limited elaboration and justification of the main policies. The overarching policies are summarised early on in the document in a series of bulleted lists captured in a two-page overview entitled *Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge*. This opening section has the character of an executive summary and includes shorter sections on: *Aims and purposes*; *Access*; *Quality and Efficiency*; *Polytechnics and Colleges: England*; and, *Universities*. These four areas map broadly to the main chapters of the White Paper, which are structured in the document as follows:

Meeting the Challenge [introductory section]

1. General
2. Access to Higher Education
3. Quality and Efficiency
4. Changes in Structure and National Planning for Higher Education

Annexes

- A. List of Abbreviations Used
- B. Higher Education Student Numbers: Northern Ireland
- C. Polytechnics and Colleges to be Transferred from Local Authorities
- D. Institutions Having the Choice to Transfer from Local Authorities
- E. Voluntary and Other Grant-Aided Colleges.

Maps

1. UK Universities
2. Polytechnics and Colleges (DES, 1987).

Although access features its own chapter, none of the three concepts are mentioned in the core *aims and purpose* of the White Paper, which, instead, are orientated towards economic drivers:

Higher education should:

- serve the economy more effectively
- pursue basic scientific research and scholarship in the arts and humanities
- have closer links with industry and commerce, and promote enterprise (DES, 1987 p. iv).

The location of the chapter on Access to higher education suggests it was a key priority in 1987. However, its omission from the aims and purpose of the White Paper imply that it sits beneath the overarching policy concerns for the economy and privatisation. Within this discourse, and parallel to the recommendations set out in the earlier Green Paper, higher education institutions were encouraged to seek alternative sources of funding and expand their provision in targeted sectors of the economy, namely science and engineering:

Policies based on response to student demand may have provided a sufficient basis for planning and financing higher education while the numbers of young people qualified to enter higher education were growing. Demand was influenced in part by employers' requirements for highly qualified manpower and by the pay and career prospects offered, and the meeting of these requirements was not constrained by demographic factors. In a period when student numbers could decline sharply for demographic reasons the Government considers student demand alone to be an insufficient basis for the planning of higher education. A major determinant must also be the demands for highly qualified manpower, stimulated in part by the success of the Government's own economic and social policies (DES, 1987, p. 7).

Demography and 'manpower' shortages are reinforced above as the drivers for the White Paper, which, in turn, shaped the principle objectives, set out below:

Actual numbers will be critically dependent on:

- achievement of the necessary shift towards science, engineering and the vocational courses, to produce the balance of skills which the nation requires
- the success of schools and colleges in raising the proportion of young people who qualify for higher education
- commitment by universities, polytechnics and the colleges to opening up higher education to more mature entrants and to more who do not possess traditional entry qualifications, and
- better value for money from the public funds made available to higher education (DES, 1987, p. 9).

Again, these objectives chime with the policy concerns for economic growth, efficiency, manpower supply and demographic change. These concerns are repeated as key themes throughout the document.

### **5.3 Representation of access-participation-mobility**

#### **5.3.1 Widening access**

Of the three concepts, *access* is the main policy motif in the 1987 White Paper, featuring explicitly and, predominantly, in the form of ‘widening access’. Whilst participation is presented as a sub-theme to ‘widening access’, mobility is not mentioned. A ‘revised policy on access’ is listed amongst the major policies in *Meeting the Challenge*:

This White Paper sets out the Government’s policy on some aspects of higher education. It announces:

- changes in funding and national planning of polytechnics and colleges in England
- revised policy on access to higher education
- Government’s initial response to the review of the University Grants Committee
- renewed emphasis on the need for quality and efficiency (DES, 1987, p. 1).

The economic discourse of the White Paper shapes the articulation of access, and its connection with participation. Facilitating access was presented as a lever for achieving *more* participation and, ultimately, growth in participation was expected to aid an increase in economic productivity. In order to rationalise the policies on widening access, the risks of *not* taking them forward were stressed, this time drawing on the unique national heritage of higher education:

The Government believes that the British system of higher education is among the best in the world, both in the quality of research and of its graduates. But no area of our national life can afford to rest on past achievement. To secure and develop the distinctive strengths of our system, continuing efforts are necessary both within higher education itself and in the wider educational framework (DES, 1987, p. 1).

Competition, not only between institutions within the national system but globally had, therefore, become a key Government concern, serving as a further indicator of the emergent neo-liberal and marketisation discourses. Drawing on

the unique nature of the British higher education system, the 1987 White Paper aligned itself explicitly with the Robbins Principle on Access (Committee on Higher Education, 1963). Specifically, the 1985 Green and 1987 White Papers redefined the Robbins Principle, presenting a 'modified', version (DES, 1987, p. 7). Indeed, the 1985 Green Paper set a new agenda for higher education access, recommending a broader interpretation than seen previously:

The UGC and the NAB have advised that qualification for higher education should be interpreted as broadly as possible and have asserted that "courses of higher education should be available to all those who can benefit from them and who wish to do so". So long as taxpayers substantially finance higher education, however, the benefit has to be sufficient to justify the cost (DES, 1985, p. 10).

*Meeting the Challenge* took its lead from the Green Paper, defining the principles upon Government wished higher education access to be founded, as the system expanded moderately into the 1990s:

The Government remains committed to the modified form of the Robbins Principle set out in Cmnd 9524. Places should be available for all who have the necessary intellectual competence, motivation and maturity to benefit from higher education and who wish to do so. Planning of higher education will need to take account, inter alia, of regular monitoring of actual demand for places and of the effects of the Government's policies to improve performance in schools and non-advanced further education on the numbers of potential entrants to higher education (DES, 1987, p. 7).

Importantly, in 1987, Government proposed that places should be available, not just to those who wished to pursue them, but also to those who could 'benefit' from them. This modification of the Robbins Principle provides important clues to Government's interpretation of access in 1987, and the ideas this encompassed about the function and purpose of higher education. At its broadest, an affiliation to the Robbins Principle indicated an agreement with the notion that higher education could fulfil economic and social ends. As the introduction states: 'higher education has a crucial role in helping the nation meet the economic and social challenges of the final decade of this century and beyond' (DES, 1987, p. iv).

The idea that higher education combined societal and individual benefits is also implied later in the document:

As for other forms of adult higher education, the current projections of student numbers show a growth during the next decade both in numbers of mature entrants to full-time courses and in numbers on part-time courses. If these expectations are to be realised, institutions will need to maintain and in some cases much increase, their efforts to provide appropriately for the particular needs which such students have. The rewards – to the individuals, to the student body, to society and to the institutions themselves – can be considerable (DES, 1987, p. 13).

### **5.3.2 Widening access and new entry routes**

The extensive use of the term *widening access* in *Meeting the Challenge* illustrates the nature and thrust of the 1987 expressions of access. The intention of the *widening access* policies was two fold: firstly, to open up entry routes into higher education and secondly, to promote more opportunities for mature learners to re-train or up-skill (largely through more part-time provision developed in partnership with business and industry). These policy intentions were justified within the technocratic discourse of the White Paper and were set against the concerns for the future of the national economy. Notwithstanding this, Government acknowledged the significance of the access policies and the departure they represented from earlier policy articulations of access:

The changes required should not be underestimated; it will be necessary both to adjust the balance of provision to match the needs of the economy and to accommodate students with a wide range of academic and practical experience than before (DES, 1987, p. 9).

The practical considerations of ‘accommodating’ new groups of students entering higher education as a result of the endeavours to widen access were presented in a relatively pragmatic tone. The above statement does, however, alight on some of the possible implications and broader considerations of the new interpretation of access.

In terms of *how* the new interpretation of access should be implemented, Government recommended that higher education institutions should accept a broader range of alternative qualifications and entry routes. The White Paper

explicitly defines these entry routes, organising them into three groups of 'recognised' qualifications, listed in a section entitled *Widening Access* in the *Access* chapter as detailed below:

Three routes into higher education are generally recognised:

- Traditional sixth form qualifications, i.e. A-levels, with the recent addition of AS levels, and Scottish Highers;
- Vocational qualifications;
- "Access courses"

In addition, institutions may admit others to a particular programme of study if fully satisfied of their capacity to benefit from it (DES, 1987, p. 9).

Broadening the entry qualifications granting higher education access, beyond the well-established Advanced Level (A-level) route, indicated a significant and affirmative step by Government. Turning specifically to the A-level route, Government noted the following:

Although the majority of young students in higher education will continue to gain entrance through holding traditional sixth form qualifications, the examinations commonly taken in schools are themselves undergoing important modifications. The introduction of the GCSE and of AS levels, the review of A-levels announced by the Government on 25 February, and the related developments in Scotland will affect the content and teaching of subsequent stages of education. The development of AS levels will helpfully broaden the curriculum base for entry. The Government urges higher education institutions to give due credit for AS level success to mature candidates as much as to younger entrants (DES, 1987, p. 10).

Reforms were, therefore, afoot for the existing routes in, and higher education institutions were called on directly to respond positively to the new AS level qualification (worth half an A-level).

As for vocational qualifications, which Government recommended as a second pathway into higher education, the following case was presented:

A growing number of students will enter higher education along the second route, with vocational qualifications of the kind now offered by about a sixth of candidates. As well as reflecting the

changes in schools and non-advanced further education this will also help ensure the maintenance of the recent shift in the balance of higher education provision towards subjects for which future employer demand is strongest – those with a technical, numerical or other vocational content (DES, 1987 p. 10).

The economic importance of vocational qualifications is stressed here; broader acceptance of these routes was expected to help overcome the economic challenges described earlier in the White Paper, and preceding Green Paper. In this context, higher education institutions (particularly the universities) were encouraged to regard vocational routes with more parity to the A-level route:

The Government therefore believes that positive steps must now be taken to increase the number of higher education entrants with vocational qualifications, for example those of BTEC. This route will be best for some of those who might not in the past have entered higher education, but it should not be seen as exclusively for them. The polytechnics and colleges already have substantial experience of providing for such students; the universities should move in this direction (DES, 1987, p. 10).

As evidence, through its widening access policies Government sought to encourage a shift in perceptions for a wider recognition of vocational qualifications by higher education, particularly amongst the universities.

Opening up the third route, Access courses, was intended to broaden the demographic profile of students participating in higher education, by increasing the number of mature and part-time learners. This was, again, an economically aligned policy aimed at establishing a highly skilled and responsive workforce. An increase in mature learners would also help to minimise the effects of a drop in the school-leaving population. Access courses were presented, precisely, as a means of boosting mature student numbers: 'Government asserts the importance of this approach [to Access courses] to increasing participation in higher education and in particular raising the number of mature entrants' (DES, 1987, p. 10).

Although Access courses had typically provided routes into a limited number of higher-level training in specific professions (mainly in teaching and social work),



*Meeting the Challenge* promoted their general acceptance for entry to a broader range of higher education courses:

The third recognised route into higher education – for those, mainly mature, entrants who hold neither traditional sixth form nor vocational qualifications – is through “access courses”. Originally, these were established mainly to assist entry to teaching training and social work training courses. In the last few years they have developed more widely, with an increasing number in scientific and technological disciplines including courses aimed at facilitating entry to teaching training in shortage subjects. Some access courses are geared to a particular receiving institution; others are designed to offer access to higher education more widely. The Government has a preference for the latter style wherever practicable (DES, 1987, p. 10).

Whilst the 1985 Green Paper was key to shaping the policies of *Meeting the Challenge*, there was a clearer intention for growth and a more specific definition of widening access in 1987. Despite the similarities between the 1985 Green and 1987 White Papers, both of these policies were shaped by a slightly less cautious tone than expressed in the Green Paper:

Competition for university places has increased over recent years and, provided the criterion of ability to benefit is strictly applied, a modest increase in opportunity to enter university as demand falls is to be welcomed. But a move in this direction should not lead to automatic admission to the universities, and particularly onto humanities courses, of those who might be more likely to profit in terms of personal development and future employment prospects from the vocational and technological courses offered by the public sector (DES, 1985, p. 14).

Nevertheless, the 1987 widening access policies were still firmly based on the assumption that entry to higher education should continue to be granted on academic achievement, albeit under a new, broader definition of recognised routes in. Although institutional autonomy was acknowledged (as noted in the following quote), advocating wider acceptance of vocational qualifications and Access courses had a direct bearing on institutional admissions policies.

The Government has reaffirmed that places should be available for all with the necessary qualities to benefit from higher

education. It also respects the long established policy of leaving to institutions the decisions on which individual students to admit. However, it now invites all those with relevant responsibilities to consider carefully the steps necessary to secure increased participation by both young and older people, and to act accordingly (DES, 1987, p. 9).

Evidently, the 1985 Green and 1987 White Papers used entry qualifications as one of the key mechanisms (levers) for broadening access. There was a deliberate calling on institutions to review their admissions practices. Indeed, validation of all three of the recognised entry routes would mark a significant development in the admissions policies of many institutions, especially the well-established, elite universities. Furthermore, Government mooted the idea of *measuring* progress against these access-related objectives:

The Government will propose to the validating and planning bodies a programme for monitoring progress in the admission of students with vocational qualifications and from access courses (DES, 1987, p. 11).

### **5.3.3 Widening access, student support and continuing education**

Attention is given in the 1987 White Paper to the practical support arrangements required alongside the widening access policies. Government recognised that widening access would not only require new approaches to admissions practices but also adjustments to learning, teaching and pastoral support:

The Government acknowledges that future arrangements for student support will have a bearing on student demand, particularly perhaps on the extent to which demand from mature and part-time students might increase. Student support arrangements are being reviewed separately and the Government's conclusions from that review will be announced in due course. The review will take full account of the importance of maintaining access to higher education by students from all social and economic backgrounds (DES, 1987, p. 11).

It was anticipated that increases in mature and part-time students would create demand for new types of support in higher education. As demonstrated above, a review of the type of support required was underway when the White Paper was

published. As a result, Government did not, however, make specific recommendations for the implementation of support arrangements.

The above quotation loosely implied a policy concern for equality, in the assertion that equal opportunities for access should be available across all socio-economic backgrounds. To assist in evening out these opportunities for all school leavers, standards in schools were brought under the spotlight:

There is a crucial need to improve standards in our schools if we are to maintain the quality of our higher education by enabling it to draw more deeply on the talents of all children, irrespective of their social or economic backgrounds (DES, 1987, p. 1).

Few details were provided about how improvements might be made, however, there was a further (tacit) recognition of the influence of school and socio-economic background on the chances of higher education progression. The idea that educational achievement and higher education participation should not be influenced by social or economic background might also imply a subtle alignment in 1987 to the *ideas* of meritocracy and mobility. Nevertheless, the emphasis was on maximising the supply of untapped talent (for the economy), rather than explicitly or exclusively on equity alone.

The 1987 White Paper presents (widening) access and (increased) participation as inherently related; adjustments were required to ensure more equal chances of access (through a broader acceptance of entry qualifications and improvements to school standards) and to ensure successful participation and completion (via changes to teaching, learning and pastoral support). As for participation, specifically, the emergent discourse of NPM stressed the concern for protecting quality and standards through 'academic excellence' and 'outputs' of higher education:

The Government attaches no less importance than previously to its policy of maintaining and raising standards. It believes that increased participation in higher education need not be at the expense of academic excellence; indeed the stimulus of change should help to sharpen awareness of the different types of achievement that properly form part of the output of higher education (DES, 1987, p. 9).

While the concern for maintaining standards framed this particular expression of access and participation with a tentative tone (more comparable to that of the 1985 Green Paper), the reference to ‘increased participation’ signalled a specific policy concern for growth.

#### **5.3.4 Participation, growth and continuing**

Participation and growth were not given a dedicated chapter in the 1987 White Paper, yet the idea of ‘increasing participation’ features extensively in the *Access to HE* chapter and in the widening access policies listed in the introductory section. A precise intention to expand student numbers was set out in the *Access* section of the introduction:

To take greater account of the country’s needs for highly qualified manpower, the Government will:

- plan for student numbers to increase in the next few years, to return to present levels in the mid-1990s and then to grow again
- study the needs of the economy so as to achieve the right number and balance of graduates in the 1990s
- plan to increase participation rates among young people, particularly young women, and mature entrants – by building on improvements in schools and colleges, and in admissions arrangements for those with non-traditional qualifications
- further develop continuing education, particularly professional updating (DES, 1987, p. iv).

Although Government wanted expansion in the economically important sectors mentioned earlier, *how* and *where* growth should occur in the system, i.e. in which type(s) of institution, was not made explicit here. Beyond the expectation for 5 per cent growth in student numbers between 1985 and 1990, there was no specific *target* for expansion in 1987. However, the emphasis on mature learners was, perhaps, indicative of a policy of diversification, to maintain growth and redistribute the demographic profile of higher education in the UK, and to mitigate for the economic and demographic uncertainties.

In relation to diversification the idea of ‘continuing education’, was an important motif for increasing participation in 1987. This notion elaborated on the idea of

‘education through life’, presented in the earlier Green Paper (DES, 1985, p. 17).

Within the White paper, there is a specific section on continuing education in the Access chapter:

The importance of adult continuing education is now widely – albeit belatedly – accepted. Many individuals want or need education in middle life, sometimes because they had no earlier opportunity and sometimes to make good deficiencies in their previous education. Overlapping with them are the many who need updating, retraining or new skills – for example in business management – in order to remain competent members of Britain’s increasingly technological workforce. The Government’s intention is that both these broad categories should be well served, and it has promoted programmes on both accounts (DES, 1987, p. 11).

The 1987 White Paper made the case for continuing education as a policy lever on the basis of creating more opportunities for adults to benefit from higher education who may have previously missed the chance to do so. In this way, the idea of fairness was, perhaps, implied, and the mandate for continuing education was framed overtly by the economic (manpower) discourse.

The intention was that the continuing education initiatives recommended in the White Paper would be developed in collaboration with industry. The Professional, Industrial and Commercial Updating (PICKUP) Programme and new Technology Centres were two such initiatives. Both schemes were put forward as a means of promoting flexibility and responsiveness in the workforce:

Whilst enabling business to capitalise on the opportunities created by new research developments, the close ties with education should foster a closer relationship between undergraduate, diploma and continuing education courses and the world of work (DES, 1987, p. 13).

#### **5.4 Related themes: financial reform, efficiency and rationalisation**

In 1987 Government made clear its commitment to funding higher education; ‘there is a continuing and inevitably substantial role for public funding in higher education’ (DES, 1987, p. 2). Nevertheless, and, as mentioned earlier in the chapter, the discourses of efficiency and rationalisation informed the new emphasis on alternative sources of funding:

The multiplicity of tasks undertaken by higher education institutions calls for a range of sources and styles of funding. Some activities attract, and on any showing should attract, funding from other sources than the public purse. This is especially true of applied research, of courses intended to update skills and knowledge, and of provision for overseas students; all of these activities ought to cover their full costs rigorously calculated (DES, 1987, p. 2).

The 1987 White Paper, therefore, marked an important phase in the move towards mixed sources of funding for higher education.

Seeking 'better value' features as another theme in the White Paper (DES, 1987, p. 9), which is also consistent with the discourse of efficiency and rationalisation. The NPM discourse also manifests itself in 1987 alongside the structural reforms presented in the fourth and final chapters (*Changes in Structure and National Planning for Higher Education*). These reforms indicated a Government objective to move away from the model of Local Education Authority (LEA) managed funding for polytechnics and colleges, towards a nationally managed system:

It is widely acknowledged that the present relationship between local authorities and their polytechnics and colleges can and often does inhibit good institutional management. It also inhibits the desirably closer relationship between institutions and industry and commerce through consultancy and other services (DES, 1987 p. 29).

In addition, the White Paper introduced the idea of replacing the 'public sector of higher education' with a new 'polytechnics and colleges sector' (DES, 1987, p. 25), on the justification that: 'the Government finds the term "public sector" used in this way [as above] unhelpful and, moreover, inconsistent with its desire to see all higher education institutions do more to attract private funding' (DES, 1987, p. 25). The aim was to rationalise the management of the polytechnics and colleges; transferring the polytechnics and major colleges away from local authority control would reduce their reliance on locally managed state funding, making private funding more important for their survival:

Its [The Government's] intention in making this change is to encourage institutions to be enterprising in attracting contracts from other sources, particularly the private sector, and thereby

to lessen their present degree of dependence on public funding (DES, 1987, p. 31).

The new funding arrangements would also create the conditions for managing state funding for *all* higher education institutions nationally. At the same time, the increasingly diverse funding streams and new arrangements would need effective co-ordination at the institutional level. As such, the 1987 White Paper raised the profile of new management structures within higher education institutions based on bringing in 'people from outside the academic world' (DES, 1987 p. v). Improved management arrangements were presented as another lever for achieving efficiency:

Efficiency will be increased by:

- Improvements in institutional management
- Changes in the management of the system
- The development and use of performance indicators (DES, 1987, p. iv).

To support the structural and financial reforms, a new funding council, the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC), and the cessation of the NAB (National Advisory Body for Public Sector Higher Education) were also recommended in 1987. The new PCFC represented one of the first steps towards a national higher education system, which would comprise the universities, polytechnics and colleges. With recognition of the established links with commerce and existing specialisms in technology and engineering, it was implied that Government anticipated the newly formed Polytechnics and Colleges sector would be well placed to host much of the forecast growth. Vocational qualifications and access courses were also already established pathways into many of the polytechnics and colleges.

## **5.5 Conclusions**

The 1987 White Paper was a significant milestone for official policy expressions of access and participation. Although the 1987 policies on widening access and increasing participation policies were presented in a formal and technocratic discourse with limited description of their justification and rationale, these policies constituted an important phase, particularly in their modification of the Robbins Principle and reinterpretation of pathways into higher education.

Notwithstanding the importance of widening access as a policy motif in 1987, the drivers shaping this White Paper were largely economic and demographic.

Widening access and increasing participation policies were key priorities in the 1987 White Paper. Yet, these policies were to be achieved within tight financial constraints and alongside a more pressing agenda for expansion in specific areas of the economy. The challenge was, therefore, set for higher education to make progress in widening access while managing increasingly limited state funding and uncertainty associated with the new financial and governance structures.



## 6. Higher Education: A New Framework (1991)

### Introduction

This chapter explores how the 1991 White Paper, *Higher Education. A New Framework* (DES, 1991a) articulates the concepts of access-participation-mobility. As in Chapter 5, the specific representation of these concepts is examined whilst implicit references are also illustrated. Evidence of the sets of ideas framing expressions of access-participation-mobility in the 1991 White Paper is also sought, alongside an assessment of whether any related concepts to access-participation-mobility are signalled.

### 6.1 The 1991 White Paper in context

*Higher Education: A New Framework* (DES, 1991a), referred to as *A New Framework* throughout this chapter, was published in May 1991 by the Department of Education and Science. The Conservative Government was still in power although, in 1990, Margaret Thatcher had resigned after 11 years as Prime Minister. She was followed by her successor, John Major, previously Chancellor of the Exchequer for the Conservative Party. While there had been considerable improvements in economic productivity since 1979, there is some dispute over whether Thatcher's policies had, in fact, brought overall improvements to wider socio-economic conditions in Britain (Peden, 1991). Nevertheless, Major continued to advocate the neo-liberal economic policies of his predecessor, particularly those promoting notions of privatisation, efficiency and rationalisation.

High inflation and the doubling of house prices between 1983 and 1988 had encouraged more borrowing and less saving amongst individual households. In tandem, a gradual rationalisation of welfare policies and increases in manufacturing costs left some aspects of the economy precarious by the early 1990s. Britain subsequently experienced another significant recession between 1991 and 1992. Although not accompanied by such a sharp downturn in output as in 1980, a slump in house prices brought new socio-economic instability. Unemployment rates rose as the recession advanced, however, Government had

introduced a series of legislative changes, which limited the extent of industrial action during this recession. Overall, the economic outlook remained bleak and Government turned increasingly to higher education to bolster economic recovery.

Although *A New Framework* was not preceded by a higher education Green Paper, it refers back to the 1987 White Paper in the justification of the majority of its key policies. *A New Framework* was also published alongside two other White Papers released in the same year. *Education and Training for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* and *Access and Opportunity: a Strategy for Education and Training* (DES, 1991b; The Scottish Office, 1991) were written for higher education in Wales and Scotland respectively. Both Papers comprised policies similar, thematically, to those of the 1987 White Paper, particularly on access and participation. The other two 1991 White Papers focused on qualifications, raising attainment and opening up vocational entry routes as levers for increasing higher education participation. The Welsh White Paper, *Education and Training for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, for example, promoted ‘equal esteem for academic and vocational qualifications’ amongst its policy concerns (DES, 1991b, p. 3). The same paper also mooted interest in a new *Advanced Diploma* qualification, combining academic and vocational learning, as an alternative to the A-level. The concerns driving this interest were comparable to themes expressed in the 1987 White Paper, including the idea of encouraging more young people to stay in education and training and, in turn, increasing the supply of industry relevant skills in the labour market.

In other policy areas, the Education Reform Act of 1988 had sanctioned the introduction of the national curriculum in primary and secondary schools in England and Wales. The aim of the new curriculum was to standardise provision in an effort to even out school quality and attainment levels, an objective that had also featured in the 1987 White Paper. As for higher education, the 1988 Act had inaugurated the new funding councils for the polytechnics and colleges, and universities: the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PGFC) and the Universities Funding Council (UFC). The Act shifted the locus of power in the funding of the polytechnics and colleges, from local to national Government and set the foreground for the main policy of the 1991 White Paper, to abolish the binary system. The policies of the 1987 and 1991 White Papers were, therefore,

closely related and, in several areas (particularly structural reform), legislation initiated by *Meeting the Challenge* did considerable groundwork for the policies of *A New Framework*.

## 6.2 Genre, scope and aims

Akin to the 1987 White Paper, the scope of *A New Framework* was UK-wide. The 1991 White Paper did, however, signify a move towards devolved policy-making owing, in part, to its recommendation for the creation of separate funding councils for England, Scotland and Wales. The 1991 White Paper is a relatively short, report-style document comprising 42 pages and eight short chapters. Like its predecessor, this White Paper includes an introductory section similar in style to an executive summary. The overall structure of the document is as follows:

Higher Education: a new framework

1. Introduction
2. Teaching
3. Research
4. The new framework
5. Quality assurance in teaching
6. Institutional titles and governance
7. Pay and conditions of service
8. Conclusion and summary.

Annex 1: The present framework

Annex 2: Projection of student numbers (DES, 1991a).

The second annex to the document includes a table comprising student number forecasts across full-time and part-time modes of study up to 2000. Like *Meeting the Challenge*, the style is technocratic, formal and, excluding the Prime Minister's Foreword and introductory statement by the Secretaries of State for England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, is written entirely in the third person. For the reader, the passive nature of the document tends to reinforce its formality and creates distance between the audience, the authors (Government) and its policies. The formal, technocratic nature of the document tends to strengthen the main (technocratic) aim in 1991, to bring about structural change through the new, single framework for higher education and, so, establishing a system where all institutions could compete on equal terms.

The policies of the 1991 White Paper are captured in a list of ‘main features’ included in the introductory statement by the Secretaries of State. The abolition of the ‘binary line’ between universities and the polytechnics and colleges was justified on the basis that the current arrangements presented an ‘obstacle’ to progress (DES, 1991a, p. 4). The policies (‘main features’) are set out below:

The main features of this new framework will be:

- a single funding structure for universities, polytechnics and colleges of higher education;
- Higher Education Funding Councils within England, Scotland and Wales to distribute public funds for both teaching and research; and new links to continue the present close relationship with Northern Ireland’s existing unitary structure;
- the extension of degree awarding powers to major institutions and the winding up of the Council for National Academic Awards;
- extension of the title of university to those polytechnics which wish to use it and, subject to the development of suitable criteria, to other major institutions;
- external scrutiny of the quality control arrangements of UK higher education institutions by a UK-wide quality audit unit developed essentially by the institutions themselves;
- quality assessment units within each Council to advise on relative quality across the institution; and
- co-operation among the Councils to maintain a common approach to quality assessment (DES, 1991a, p. 4).

As the main features illustrate, the 1991 policies were organised around two principle themes; first, structural change (ending the binary line and extending the title of university to the polytechnics), and second, assuring and monitoring quality within the new framework. Indeed, the 1987 White Paper had promoted the idea of monitoring quality, and the NPM discourse had gathered speed by 1991. The new national funding arrangements introduced by the 1987 White Paper had also created the appropriate conditions for Government to subsequently propose an end to the binary line. In this sense, the 1991 White Paper almost takes the form of a sequel policy document to the 1987 White Paper. Given the ground covered in 1987, the recommendation to abolish the binary divide appears almost as a logical next step in 1991.

Whilst the purpose, and indeed the title, of the 1991 White Paper emphasise the importance attached to the single framework, the opening statements by the Prime Minister and other relevant ministers signal that *participation* would play a relatively significant role in this new framework. The opening paragraph of the Prime Minister's Foreword provides a good example of this observation:

In 1979, only one young person in eight went on to higher education. Today, it is one in five. More resources have helped provide more opportunities than ever before. In this White Paper, we describe the new framework that will enable even more of our young people to go on to higher education. We are well on course for one in three doing so by the year 2000 (DES, 1991a, p. 2).

As Major stated, higher education participation had almost doubled, to some 20 per cent of 18-19 year olds, since the Conservative Party was first elected in 1979. The intention, as set out above, was to continue this pattern of growth, as set out above and re-affirmed in the introductory statement by the Secretaries of State:

The Government's policies have helped secure record numbers and participation in higher education. We need to build on this success as we move towards the year 2000 (DES, 1991a, p. 4).

The inclusion of the collective noun 'we' in both excerpts above tends to instil a feeling that increasing participation to this extent was, or at least should be, a goal shared of society as a whole and of the different UK administrations. The inclusion of an explicit expectation for growth in the opening of the White Paper is perhaps indicative of the importance of expansion in 1991. The opening statements of the 1991 White Paper set out an expectation that participation levels would increase to 30 per cent of young people (18-19 year olds) by the end of the decade. Reaching this level by 2000 would require a continuation of the previous decade's growth rate. Should the anticipated participation levels be achieved, the 1990s would represent an important moment for higher education expansion in the UK; according to Trow's model (1974) this step would take the system from elite to mass status.

## 6.3 Representation of access-participation-mobility

### 6.3.1 Widening access

Despite the Government expectation that participation levels would increase, the emphasis on access, participation or mobility in the 1991 White Paper is relatively light. Unlike *Meeting the Challenge* (DES, 1987), which attributed an entire chapter to *Access to Higher Education*, none of the three concepts feature their own chapter in 1991. Notwithstanding this, *access* and *participation* are articulated in 1991 via a restatement of the 1987 access policies. It is clear from the outset of the document that in 1991 the Major Government wished to simply carry forward the access policies set out four years previously by the Thatcher Government. This commitment is evidenced in the second paragraph of the introductory chapter, in connection with the five priority areas for the 1991 White Paper:

The Government reaffirms its view of the aims and purposes of higher education and its policies on access set out in the 1987 White Paper *Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge* (Cmnd 114). The present White Paper describes the achievements since 1987; considers the funding for further expansion; and announces changes in the five main areas which currently seal the binary line in place, namely:

- funding for teaching;
- funding for research;
- degree awarding powers and quality assurance;
- institutional titles and governance, and
- pay and conditions (DES, 1991a, p. 7).

The above suggests that *access* was high on the agenda, although it did not feature specifically in the bulleted list of priorities. This representation might also infer that, whilst the 1987 access policies were to be continued, access was considered a secondary priority (a sub-theme) in *A New Framework*. Within this context, the main references to access in 1991 take the form of a summary of progress to date since 1987. Early in the document Government advised that significant achievements had been made since the 1987 White Paper:

In line with the Government's commitment in the 1987 White Paper *Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge* places in higher education have been secured for an increasing number of young people and adults who have the necessary intellectual

competence, motivation and maturity to benefit from higher education and wish to do so. More young people than ever before are staying on in full-time education after the age of 16. One in five of all 18-19 year olds now enter higher education each year compared with one in seven at the time of the 1987 White Paper. In Scotland and Northern Ireland one in four young people already enter higher education. More mature students than young people now enter part-time and full-time courses in higher education each year. Higher education is more accessible to people from all sections of society (DES, 1991a, p. 8).

Framing access within a broader objective of facilitating entry to higher education from 'all sections of society' indicates there was an (implicit) alignment to meritocratic principles. The modified Robbins Principle on Access, which had been set out in the 1985 Green and 1987 White Papers, is quoted above without referencing Robbins specifically. Of note, access, per se, was not mentioned in the *Conclusion and Summary* chapter of the 1991 White Paper. Despite its endorsement earlier on in the policy document, *widening access* was certainly not the main substance of this White Paper. The above excerpt also suggests that Government, perhaps, felt that sufficient progress had already been made in the area of access and was content for progress to continue along the existing trajectory, without any specific or new intervention. The focus was on describing the current status quo and recent successes of Government, rather than presenting a detailed description of future policy, development or, indeed, an overall vision for higher education access.

With limited details of the exact objectives for access in the document, it is difficult to grasp the essence of how Government interpreted access, participation and mobility in 1991. It is left to the reader to assume that re-affirming the previous access policies referred to *all* aspects of the 1987 policies, including the revised Robbins Principle on Access. Overall, there is no specific mention of the Robbins Principle, or of the research into socio-economic trends amongst those entering higher education, which were referenced in the 1987 White Paper. As a consequence, the rationale for and evidence supporting the continuation of the 1987 access policies is relatively limited in 1991.

Examining related policy levers provides some clues to the nature of the 1991 interpretation of access and participation. For example, and akin to the other

White Papers published in the same year, the section entitled *The Way Forward* in the introduction indicated that the school reforms should promote greater parity between academic and vocational qualifications, as well as boosting demand in science, engineering and technology subjects. Whilst these aims were, like the 1987 White Paper, framed by technocratic objectives the policy measures were also expected to contribute to the widening access agenda:

The Government's policies for schools, and in particular examination reforms, are encouraging more young people to stay on in school or college after 16 and then apply for a place in higher education. These trends will be reinforced by the Government's plans for the implementation of the National Curriculum and for the independence of Further Education and Sixth Form Colleges in England and Wales, and the parallel developments in Scotland, with their general aim of achieving equality of status and standards between academic and vocational qualifications. These reforms will also encourage more young people to study science, engineering and technology throughout their school careers and beyond. In addition, they can be expected to encourage the further widening of access to higher education (DES, 1991a, p. 10).

*Widening access* was, therefore, presented almost as a *by-product of*, rather than *the impetus for*, the school reforms. The quotation above also suggests an underlying assumption that the challenge of increasing the supply of prospective entrants would be met predominantly by increasing the number of qualified school-leavers. Within the discourse of NPM, evidenced by references to competition, efficiency and rationalisation, the nature of the school reforms also indicated a Government objective to move from locally to nationally administered state funding for post-16 education, as had been recommended for the polytechnics in 1987.

### **6.3.2 Access and higher education admissions**

*A New Framework* makes two specific recommendations for higher education admissions. The first was for the merger of the two separate bodies, Universities Central Council on Admissions (UCCA) and the Polytechnics Central Admission System (PCAS), into one organisation serving all higher education institutions in the UK. This recommendation is made in the sixth chapter, *Institutional Titles and Governance* and presented alongside the policies for the single framework and its



anticipated efficiencies. This policy is presented in its entirety in the excerpt below:

Building on the greater collaboration already introduced, the Government will look to the Universities Central Council on Admissions (UCCA) and the Polytechnics Central Admissions System (PCAS) to come together as a central agency for admissions. But it will continue to be for individual institutions to decide whether to join these arrangements (DES, 1991a, p. 33).

Given there was no mention of other drivers or outcomes, it can perhaps be gleaned from the statement above that the creation of one national admissions body was not specifically about access or participation, rather it was a *functional* objective linked to the technocratic drivers underpinning the 1991 White Paper.

The second recommendation associated with higher education admissions practices appears in the first chapter in a short section entitled *The Way Forward*, where institutions were asked to continue reviewing their local admissions practices:

The latest projection of student numbers indicates that participation rates in higher education will continue to increase throughout the 1990s. By the year 2000, the Government expects that approaching one in three of all 18-19 year olds will enter higher education. There will also be increased demand from adults for part-time study. Institutions will need to continue to keep their admissions practices under review. Because of the demographic trends, the rate of increase in student numbers is expected to slow down in the mid-1990s, followed by more rapid growth towards the end of the decade. Total full-time equivalent numbers of students are projected to increase by approaching one half up to the year 2000 (DES, 1991a, p. 10).

The spotlight on admissions seems to have been a response to the demographic concerns of 1987. In this way, the 1991 White Paper dovetails with the 1987 widening access policies. The new, recognised entry routes comprising vocational qualifications and access courses, promoted in the 1987 White Paper, are not mentioned in 1991. Moreover, details of *which* admissions practices should be reviewed and *how* are not included. Notwithstanding this, the reference made above to the forecasts, including continued growth in demand from adults for

part-time courses, *does* imply that Government continued to believe that institutional admissions practices had an important function in the endeavour to broaden out access to higher education, particularly for mature students.

In relation to policies on admissions and, more specifically, qualifications, the 1991 White Paper expressed an interest in rolling out a two-year, vocational degree:

The Government believes there is a case for some increase over the next decade in the provision of high quality two-year full-time diploma courses, particularly those with a vocational emphasis. It sees no case for an increase in the average length of courses. The Government will consult the funding bodies and others about measures to promote developments which will assist in achieving the required expansion with greater efficiency (DES, 1991a, p. 12).

As noted in Chapter 5, the 1987 White Paper had called on institutions to widen access with little, if any, funds made available to support this. The development of a two-year degree would, in principle, go some way to facilitating expansion in a cost effective way (the idea being that shorter degrees should incur less costs). However, it might be reasonable to deduce that the rollout of a completely new qualification would, undoubtedly, create new costs. Despite these possible tensions, the promotion of the two-year degree illustrates the use of qualifications, anew, as a policy lever for increasing participation. Where the 1987 White Paper focused on entry routes *into* higher education, the 1991 White Paper turned attention to higher education qualifications as a lever for raising participation rates and, in turn, addressing the higher-level skill shortages. This, perhaps, illustrates that, of the three concepts, participation was the most prominent and influential motif in 1991.

### **6.3.3 Participation in the context of structural change and competition**

As noted previously, the 1991 White Paper makes it clear that, overall, participation was expected to grow by 2000. The Government projections for growth were based on forecast demographic trends, rather than a specific policy for planned expansion. Government also signalled that a considerable share of the anticipated expansion should continue to be within the polytechnics:

The increase in the level of publicly funded higher education tuition fees paid as part of student awards has, as intended, provided an incentive to institutions to expand efficiently. The polytechnics and colleges have continued to lead this expansion, achieving considerable improvements in efficiency as capacity at the margin has been taken up. The freedom from local government controls granted to English polytechnics and colleges by the Education Reform Act has been a major stimulus for their remarkable recent success (DES, 1991a, pp. 8-9).

In addition, Government wished to see more qualified school leavers selecting polytechnics as their first choice, over the universities:

In deciding where to continue their studies in higher education, many able school leavers do not give the polytechnics as their first choice (DES, 1991a, p. 9).

As noted previously, the expectation of expansion in 1991 was guided by an objective for efficient and cost-effective growth. In this vein, *A New Framework* served as a conduit for furthering the neo-liberal discourses evident in the 1987 White Paper and accelerating the emergent discourses of competition and marketisation:

The Government believes that the real key to achieving cost effective expansion lies in greater competition for funds and students. That can best be achieved by breaking down the increasingly artificial and unhelpful barriers between the universities and the polytechnics and colleges (DES, 1991a, p. 12).

Turning to the idea of 'competition', Government anticipated that the single framework, where all institutions would be eligible to receive the same title, would facilitate *fair* and equal competition in the higher education market. The White Paper also suggests that Government expected the single framework to bring more flexibility in the system to respond to changing demands in the economy:

Underpinning the changes is the Government's objective of continuing to secure a high quality system of higher education. The new framework proposed in this White Paper will enable institutions to make yet more effective responses to increasing demand for higher education. This will bring benefits for the

individuals who study as well as for the economy and society as a whole (DES, 1991a, p. 7).

As evidenced above, the new framework was intended to satisfy both economic and societal needs. Although the 1991 White Paper employed economic *and* social arguments to justify the main policy of structural change, elaboration into the wider benefits for society is limited. Indeed, the justification for growth in 1991 was predominantly economic.

It is, perhaps, significant that the concepts of efficiency and rationalisation were presented alongside expressions of access and participation in 1991. The impression is given that growth would need to be realised within new financial constraints. Rather than making new funds available, the White Paper implied that public spending was likely to be curbed in future:

The Government's commitment to awarding higher education a fair share of public expenditure is clear. But the general need to contain public spending, the pattern of relative costs in higher education, and the demand for capital investment, all mean that a continuing drive for greater efficiency will need to be secured (DES, 1991a, p. 12).

Government acknowledged the efforts that had been made since 1987 by institutions in their responsiveness to commercial needs, for example in the growth of part-time courses for those who are also in employment. However, it suggested that more must be done to promote demand in the key growth areas for the economy: 'demand from students for courses in science, engineering and technology have been less buoyant than the Government would have wished' (DES, 1991a, p. 9).

Given that growth in science, engineering technology and technology disciplines since 1987 had not been as significant as Government had envisaged, the international competitiveness of the national economy was an even more pressing driver for the 1991 White Paper. Government believed the existing structures of state funding and control were impeding expansion and progress in these disciplines. As such, the notion of economic freedom, to be achieved through privatisation and a reduction in state funding, was further justified:

The Government believes that it is in the interests of universities, polytechnics and colleges to continue to look for increased levels of funding from private sources in particular from industry and commerce, from benefactors and alumni, and from present sources of income. Such private income can enhance considerably the independence of individual institutions (DES, 1991a, p.10).

*A New Framework*, therefore, indicated a new phase in the state-higher education relationship, shaped by an objective to lessen the role of the state and further instil market principles.

Although the 1991 White Paper is a relatively short document it initiated a significant period of change for the higher education system, including new expectations as to the purpose and function of higher education institutions. The ideas of competition and market principles became more prominent, new degree awarding powers were recommended, as were further reforms to national funding arrangements. Equally, institutions were under continued pressure to be more responsive to the economy, developing more partnerships with business and implementing new mechanisms for assuring quality and standards. Coupled with this, institutions were expected to continue to make progress around widening access and increasing participation. Of note, however, in the closing paragraph to the *Conclusion and Summary* there is no reference to access or participation and expansion is only mentioned in connection with *efficiency*:

This White Paper also sets out the Government's intentions to consult on various matters relating to the new framework and the provision to be made within it, namely:

- measures to promote developments which will assist in achieving the required expansion with greater efficiency;
- arrangements for supporting computing in higher education, currently undertaken by the UFC's Information Systems Committee;
- the criteria and arrangements for extended degree awarding powers beyond the present polytechnics;
- the nature and development of the proposed quality audit committee;
- the scope for extending the use of the title of university beyond present polytechnics;
- the financial year adopted across higher education; and

- arrangements for bringing greater coherence to statistical information across higher education (DES, 1991a, p. 38).

The emphasis on the immediate future was shaped extensively by policy concerns for the practical arrangements associated with the new framework. Efficiency, standardisation, quality and performance measurement (via more coherent statistics for the entire sector and the implementation of performance indicators) were important themes underpinning the idea of the new framework.

Within the heavily technocratic discourse framing the 1991 White Paper, the idea of mobility does not feature, and there is also little reference to related ideas, such as meritocracy or social justice. The only inference in the *Conclusion and Summary* to the benefits of increasing participation is an almost word-for-word repetition of the expectation for growth, set out in the opening of the document:

Taken together with the Government's policies in schools and further education, it can be expected that nearly one in three of all young people will enter higher education by the year 2000, and that participation by mature entrants will also increase. The Government is determined to maintain and enhance quality of higher education, and to ensure that this education is increasingly relevant to students' various needs. This will benefit both the individuals who participate and the economy and society as a whole (DES, 1991a, p. 37).

Notions of participation and re-distribution were, thus, framed by the idea of quality but also in relation to benefits to the individual, economy and society. In this way, the White Paper briefly constructs higher education in relation to its multiple functions, as a public and private good. However, the repetition of this statement within the document and the limited rationale for increasing participation, beyond the health of the economy, reinforce the pragmatic and technocratic discourse framing the 1991 document.

## 6.4 Conclusions

Representation of access-participation-mobility is relatively limited in the 1991 White Paper. Of the three core concepts, participation features most extensively. There is no reference to mobility or its associated concepts and only a reiteration of the 1987 (widening) access policies. While the expectation for growth in the

participation rate suggested a commitment to mass expansion, the key priority was structural change. The 1991 White Paper is technocratic in nature and, in this setting, the justification for the policies on access and participation was limited. The genre of the document and framing of access and participation highlight the level of importance attached to the other priorities of *A New Framework*, principally those on creating the single framework, promoting competition and efficiency, and connecting higher education even more closely to growth areas in the economy.

## 7. The Future of Higher Education (2003)

### Introduction

This chapter examines the extent to which access-participation-mobility are expressed in the 2003 White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003). Like the two previous chapters, the readings highlight explicit representations of the three concepts and seek out the ideas foregrounding the key policies on access-participation-mobility. This chapter includes a longer section on the context of the 2003 White Paper, given a change in Government and the extent of policy developments between 1991 and 2003.

### 7.1 The 2003 White Paper in context

*The Future of Higher Education* was published in January 2003 by the Department of Education and Skills of the Labour Government. Two key drivers for this White Paper were to: i) initiate a deregulation of undergraduate tuition fees amid concerns for the future sustainability of higher education; and, ii) reiterate the Government target to achieve a 50 per cent participation rate by 2010. As for the policy developments since the 1991 White Paper, in 1992 the Department for Education and Science had been replaced by the Department for Education, then by the Department for Education and Employment in 1995 and the Department for Education and Skills in 2001. The main policies of the 1991 White Paper had also been realised via the Further and Higher Education Act in 1992, which introduced the new single funding council for England (HEFCE) and ended the binary line. The recommendation for the collection of standardised statistics for England, Wales Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Great Britain and the UK had also been implemented; HESA was established in 1993. The availability of system-wide statistics, alongside a context of increasingly stretched state funding and continued growth in student numbers, justified the new system of quotas for undergraduate places at each institution in 1994, as described in Chapter 2.

New funding constraints and limits on student numbers had not been well received by the universities and, in response, in 1996, the Conservative Government tasked Lord Ron Dearing, then Chancellor of the University of Nottingham, with chairing a committee to review the purpose, structure and



funding of UK higher education for the next 20 years. The Dearing Review, also noted in Chapter 2, had been commissioned just before the election of the Labour Government in May 1997, which marked the end of 18 years of Conservative administration. Labour's election campaign had placed education high on the agenda, presenting it as the key to unlocking opportunity across society. In a speech delivered in 1996 Tony Blair, the Labour Party leader, made this pledge expressly clear:

When the Tories talk about the spirit of enterprise they mean a few self-made millionaires. Well, best of luck to them. But there should be a spirit of enterprise and achievement on the shop floor, in the office as well: in the 16 year-old who starts as an office girl with the realistic chance of ending up as the office manager; in the young graduate with the confidence to take initiatives; in the secretary who takes time out to learn a new language and comes back to search for a new and better job. These people have enterprise within them. They have talent and potential within them. Ask me my three main priorities for government and I tell you: education, education and education (Blair, 1996, para 32).

The speech by Blair indicated that education, as a Labour Government priority, would be shaped by a different discourse, one featuring the principles of fairness, equality of opportunity and social justice. Blair's pre-election speech also intimated the *idea* of social mobility and, specifically, the notion of inter-generational mobility:

I know in my own constituency, the miners in 1945 who voted Labour did so that their sons would not have to go down the pit and work in the conditions that they had. And in 1964 their children voted Labour because they saw the next generation's chance to go to university and do better than their parents had done. The true radical mission of the Labour Party, new and old, is this: not to hold people back but to help them get on - all the people (Blair, 1996, para 17).

Furthermore, the New Labour manifesto for the 1997 General Election had promised 'prosperity for all', with a commitment to providing more state funds for school education:

The Conservatives have cut government spending on education as a share of national income by the equivalent of more than £3

billion as spending on the bills of economic and social failure has risen. We are committed to reversing this trend of spending. Over the course of a five-year Parliament, as we cut the costs of economic and social failure we will raise the proportion of national income spent on education (Labour Party, 1997).

New Labour was attempting to set its policies aside from those of the existing Government, although, like the Conservatives, Labour anticipated difficult times ahead for higher education finance. In this respect, there were some shared concerns between the new and incumbent Governments, albeit expressed within different discourses. Importantly, the Labour election manifesto indicated an acceptance of the principle of tuition fees for undergraduate study, justifying this step change on the individual benefits enjoyed by graduates (in the form of better career prospects):

The improvement and expansion needed cannot be funded out of general taxation. Our proposals for funding have been made to the Dearing Committee, in line with successful policies abroad. The costs of student maintenance should be repaid by graduates on an income-related basis, from the career success to which higher education has contributed (Labour Party, 1997).

Soon after the General Election the Dearing Committee published its final report, in July 1997. For the first time, student contributions to undergraduate tuition fees were formally recommended as a mechanism for securing future sustainability. Dearing also made important recommendations for *widening participation*, dedicating an entire chapter in the final report to this new motif. Subsequently, the Dearing Report formalised the widening participation agenda:

We recommend to the Government and the Funding Bodies that, when allocating funds for the expansion of higher education, they give priority to those institutions which can demonstrate their commitment to widening participation, and have in place a participation strategy, a mechanism for monitoring progress, and provision for review by the governing body of achievement (National Committee, 1997, p. 14).

The Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) for the New Labour Government published its official response to the Dearing Report in February 1998, *The Learning Age: Higher Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Response to Dearing* (DfEE, 1998a), which set out the recommendations it planned to

implement. In principle, New Labour wanted higher education to contribute *more* to society *and* the economy, principally through the idea of 'lifelong learning':

The Government sees higher education playing a key role in lifelong learning and wants to see it making an even bigger contribution in future by:

- increasing and widening participation, particularly from groups who are under-represented in higher education, including people with disabilities and young people from semi-skilled or unskilled family backgrounds and from disadvantaged localities;
- offering opportunities later in life to those who missed out first time round;
- increasing its contribution to the economy and its responsiveness to the needs of business;
- collaborating more closely and effectively with other institutions and with the world of work;
- exploiting new technology and flexible delivery so as to make itself more accessible and ensuring the maximum use is made of its facilities through longer opening hours (DfEE, 1998a p. 3).

The first chapter of the Government Response to Dearing was dedicated to *Increasing Participation and Widening Access*. This chapter demonstrated Government's continued alignment to the ideas underpinning the Robbins Principle of Access:

Increasing opportunities for people to learn and widening access are at the heart of this Government's policies for creating a learning society. The Government is committed to the principle that anyone who has the capability for higher education should have the opportunity to benefit from it and we will therefore lift the cap on student plans imposed by the last government (DfEE, 1998a, p. 7).

Amongst its recommendations for widening participation, the Response to Dearing called on the higher education funding councils to make additional funds available for institutions to recruit young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods. HEFCE promptly initiated consultations for new widening participation initiatives and introduced the idea of institutional participation strategies, which would include evidence of partnerships with schools and efforts to widen participation through institutional policies on recruitment, selection and

retention. A new committee, Equal Opportunities, Access and Lifelong Learning (EQUALL), was established to oversee these developments. The 'postcode premium' for students recruited from lower socio-economic groups and the low participation neighbourhoods were introduced shortly thereafter as a contribution to institutional teaching allocations (HEFCE, 1998). This new funding stream added to the existing premium for part-time and mature students, in recognition of the additional costs associated with teaching and support for students from under-represented groups. The idea of additional support had, indeed, been mentioned in the 1987 White Paper.

Alongside its Response to Dearing, Labour published the Green Paper on lifelong learning. *The Learning Age: a renaissance for a new Britain* (DfEE, 1998b) was concerned with securing opportunities for adult learning and training at all life stages. In the Foreword to the Green Paper, David Blunkett, as Secretary of State for Education and Employment, captured the distinct, economic drivers for lifelong learning:

Learning is the key to prosperity – for each of us as individuals, as well as for the nation as a whole. Investment in human capital will be the foundation of success in the knowledge-based global economy of the twenty-first century (DfEE, 1998b, p. 7).

A key statement by Tony Blair was also quoted in the Green Paper, which highlighted the intensity of the focus on education and the economy: 'education is the best *economic* policy we have' (DfEE, 1998b, p. 9). Notwithstanding the economic orientation of the New Labour policies, the civic role of higher education had started to receive more policy attention:

As well as securing our economic future, learning has a wider contribution. It helps make ours a civilised society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship. Learning enables people to play a full part in their community. It strengthens the family, the neighbourhood and consequently the nation. It helps us to fulfil our potential and opens doors to a love of music, art and literature. That is why we value learning for its own sake as well as for the equality of opportunity it brings (DfEE, 1998b, p7).

Within this setting, the Teaching and Higher Education Act, passed in July 1998, introduced the means tested annual undergraduate tuition fee of £1,000.

Although the 2003 White Paper was not foregrounded by a higher education Green Paper, *The Future of Higher Education* draws on the extensive body of policy texts published after the election of the New Labour Government. Specifically, at the Labour Party annual conference in 1999 Tony Blair had announced that 50 per cent participation amongst the adult population should be achieved within the next decade (Blair, 1999). The White Paper formalised the target for 50 per cent participation amongst the aged 18 to 30 population by 2010:

Our system has successfully transformed itself from an elite system – in which, in 1962 only around 6 per cent of those under 21 participated – to one where in England around 43 per cent of those aged between 18 and 30 go to university. Despite the rise in the numbers participating in higher education, the average salary premium has not declined over time and remains the highest in the OECD. It is not the case that ‘more means worse’ (DfES, 2003, p. 12).

Participation had risen from 14.6 per cent in 1987 to 43 per cent by 2003 (DES, 1991a; DfES, 2003); national growth in higher education had, therefore, been considerable. New Labour had also invested heavily in economic growth since entering Government, and, by the late 1990s, unemployment had reduced to levels comparable to those prior the 1991 recession. The early New Labour period was also characterised by a shift away from its traditional policies of favouring state ownership of key industries and unionisation. Instead, ideas associated with NPM continued to feature in higher education policy discourse, though under new articulations of the purpose of higher education and its relationships to economy and society.

## **7.2 Genre, scope and aims**

The *Future of Higher Education* is a considerably longer document than the 1987 and 1991 White Papers, comprising 106 pages and seven chapters. There are two chapters devoted to *expansion* and *fair access* within the structure set out below:

#### Foreword and Executive Summary

1. The need for reform
2. Research excellence – building on our strengths
3. Higher education and business – exchanging and developing knowledge and skills
4. Teaching and learning – delivering excellence
5. Expanding higher education to meet our needs
6. Fair access
7. Freedom and funding

#### Annexes

1. Higher education strategy: phases of delivery
2. Work to reduce bureaucracy in higher education
3. Extending and simplifying student support
4. Glossary (DfES, 2003).

Although the expansion and access chapters are towards the end of the document the first chapter, *The need for reform*, gives an extensive justification for *growth* and *widening participation*, focusing specifically on skills shortages in the labour market and higher education participation rates in competitor nations:

Demand for graduates is very strong, and research shows that 80 per cent of the 1.7 million new jobs which are expected to be created by the end of the decade will be in occupations which normally recruit those with higher education qualifications. So it is in the country's interest to expand higher education. At the moment we calculate that the participation rate for English students in higher education is around 43 per cent of 18–30 year olds. Participation rates are lower, according to OECD comparisons, than in many other developed countries, including Australia, Finland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway and Sweden (DfES, 2003, p. 16).

The geographic scope of the 2003 White Paper is also defined in a standalone, opening statement:

Our strategy covers Higher Education in England. Some issues are 'reserved' matters for the UK parliament, and where the document deals with these, it will also affect Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We have flagged this up clearly in the text. It sets out a vision for all Higher Education in England, including Universities, University Colleges, Colleges of Higher Education, Colleges of Further Education, and other institutions. The word 'University' is frequently used, for reading ease, as a substitute for 'Higher Education Institution' (DfES, 2003, p. 3).

The 2003 White Paper marked the winding down of higher education policy for the UK in its entirety, in large part as a consequence of the well-established single funding councils for the devolved nations, which had been introduced by the previous Government.

*The Future of Higher Education* set out a 'vision' for higher education, which helped to structure the 2003 policies. The first chapter describes the vision in detail, in the form of eleven objectives. Listed sixth and eighth, are two objectives with direct relevance to access and participation, which were to:

- expand towards 50 per cent participation for young people aged 18-30 years from all backgrounds and providing courses which satisfy both students and employers', and
- offer the opportunity of higher education to all those who have the potential to benefit (DfES, 2003, p. 22).

As for genre, the 2003 White Paper is written in a report style although is more descriptive than the previous two White Papers. With the annex including an opportunity for comment, the 2003 White Paper combines a consultative function with the announcement of new policy. Stylistically, the White Paper uses a range of metaphors to illustrate Government's understanding of the purpose of higher education. Of note, the vision described a desire to see 'universities as creators of knowledge and understanding and as engines for applying that new knowledge for the benefit of all' (DfES, 2003, p. 21). As part of the rationale for reform, higher education was represented as 'powering the economy' (DfES, 2003, p. 10). The choice of metaphors evokes images of an industrial era, perhaps to emphasise the idea that Government considered higher education as an essential cog in the economy.

The use of emotive language, with an emphasis on the consequences of *not* implementing the proposed reforms, is persuasive and serves to strengthen the justification for the main policies. For example, in a section entitled *The danger of decline* in Chapter 1, the opening paragraph asserts that:

The whole system is undoubtedly under severe pressure and at serious risk of decline, decisions must therefore be taken to

maintain the excellence of the sector as a whole (DfES, 2003, p. 13).

By comparing the English higher education system with other developed nations, such as Norway, Sweden and New Zealand, the 2003 White Paper stressed the idea that England had a lot of 'catching up to do' (DfES, 2003, p. 16). Indeed, 'the productivity gap', 'the skills gap' and 'the social class gap' are referenced frequently throughout the document as rationales for the policies presented. Furthermore, and after outlining the obstacles ahead, Government stated that 'we cannot shirk the challenge of these critical issues. Higher education is too important' (DfES, 2003, p. 21). The extensive use of collective nouns like 'we' and 'our' throughout was perhaps intended to cultivate a feeling of shared responsibility for resolving these challenges, which were summarised in the Executive Summary:

- Higher education must expand to meet rising skills needs
- The social class gap among those entering university remains too wide
- Many of our economic competitors invest more in higher education
- Universities are struggling to employ the best academics
- Funding per student fell 36 per cent between 1989 and 1997
- The investment backlog in teaching and research facilities is estimated at £8 billion
- Universities need stronger links with business and economy (DfES, 2003, p. 4).

The challenges listed above are indicative of the themes underpinning the 2003 White Paper, namely sustaining economic growth through higher-level skills (closing the 'skills gap'), stabilising higher education funding, and addressing inequalities associated with access and participation.

### **7.3 Representation of access-participation-mobility**

#### **7.3.1 Widening participation and expansion**

Participation and expansion receive comparatively more attention than access and mobility in the 2003 White Paper. 'Widening participation' is the key motif, taking its lead from the Dearing Report. *The Future of Higher Education* brings together three sub-themes concerning widening participation, which are



presented as policy levers for expansion. The first was achieving the 50 per cent participation target. The second, expanding the two-year foundation degree, introduced by the previous Government:

The bulk of the expansion will come through new types of qualification, tailored to the needs of students and of the economy. Our emphasis will be on the expansion of two-year work-focused foundation degrees, as they become the primary work-focused higher education qualification (DfES, 2003, p. 57).

The third lever for widening participation centred on flexible, accessible higher education provision. Government stressed that it did not wish to see expansion through 'more of the same' (DfES, 2003, p. 60), rather it wanted innovation in how higher education was provided, to include more part-time, on-line courses and new, more flexible structures for individuals to accrue higher level credits and qualifications. Collaborative arrangements between foundation degree providers, namely further education colleges, and universities were also promoted as alternative routes into the final year of three-year degree programmes:

We will also encourage other sorts of flexible provision, which meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body, by improving more support for those doing part-time degrees, and supporting the development of flexible "2+" arrangements, credit transfer, and e-learning (DfES, 2003, p. 58).

The rationale for the 2003 widening participation policies was presented largely in conjunction with the justification for expansion. A section entitled *The Case for Expansion* in Chapter 5 of the document covers economic productivity and benefits to the individual and wider society as the main reasons for growth (see following quotes). The overriding rationale was economic, principally (and as noted previously) responding to 'the skills gap' in science, engineering and technology (DfES, 2003, p. 61), together with securing global competitiveness:

A comprehensive review of the academic literature suggests that there is compelling evidence that education increases productivity, and moreover that higher education is the most important phase of education for economic growth in developed countries, with increases in higher education found to be positively and significantly related to per capita income growth (DfES, 2003, p. 58).

The importance of higher education for economic growth could not be made more explicit here. There was also an emergent focus on 'evidence' based policies.

Aside from the economic benefits of higher education, the individual and collective benefits were presented almost as a secondary rationale for expansion in a sub-section to *The Case for Expansion*, entitled *Individuals*:

For the individual, the economic benefits of higher education are well documented – quite apart from the opportunity for personal and intellectual fulfilment. Graduates and those who have a 'sub-degree' qualification earn, on average, around 50 percent more than non-graduates. Graduates are half as likely to be unemployed, and as a group they have enjoyed double the number of job promotions over the last five years, compared to non-graduates.

Higher education also brings social benefits – there is strong evidence that suggests that graduates are likely to be more engaged citizens. For instance, one Home Office report found a strong positive correlation between the cohesiveness of local communities and participation in higher education (DfES, 2003, p. 59).

The benefits of higher education for graduates, in terms of higher earning power, are highlighted above. Although the term social mobility was not used explicitly in 2003, the idea that higher education could guarantee better life chances is embedded in the language. There was also a new emphasis on the civic contribution of higher education. Indeed, the introduction states that higher education must continue to foster 'social harmony' (DfES, 2003, p. 2), while the conclusion called on higher education to 'continue to embody the values which are central to a democratic society' (p. 92). Promoting the civic function of higher education appears to demonstrate efforts by Government to appeal to a wide audience (particularly those who valued the general principles of democracy and fairness) and to engender public support for the idea of near-universal participation.

There were two strands to widening participation in 2003. Firstly, opportunities should be provided for adults to participate in higher education later in life, particularly if they missed the chance to do so previously. Secondly, young people

from all backgrounds should have more opportunity to progress to higher education. Moving away from an elite system was presented in the White Paper as an over-arching justification for widening participation, as noted in the Foreword by the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Charles Clarke:

A university place has ceased to be the preserve of a tiny elite but been extended to hundreds of thousands more students each year. In the early 1960s only 6 per cent of under-21s went to university, whereas today around 43 per cent of 18-30 year olds in England enter higher education (DfES, 2003, p. 2).

Government presented widening participation as a vehicle for achieving fairness and equality of opportunity. Widening participation was framed within a distinct focus on minimising social class inequalities by closing the 'social class gap' and supporting the 'poorer' in society (DfES, 2003, p. 2):

The single most important cause of the social class division in higher education participation is differential attainment in schools and colleges. While around 43 per cent of 18 year olds from higher socio-economic backgrounds gain two or more A-levels, only 19 per cent of those from lower socio-economic backgrounds do so (DfES, 2003, p. 68).

Government recognised that inequality in school was a contributory factor to the under-representation of disadvantaged groups in higher education. School attainment and higher education participation were represented as important channels through which widening and increasing participation should be achieved. The concept of 'social justice' encapsulated some of these ideas, and this term was first introduced to the higher education White Paper sphere in 2003:

Education must be a force for opportunity and social justice, not for the entrenchment of privilege. We must make certain that the opportunities that higher education brings are available to all those who have the potential to benefit from them, regardless of their background. This is not just about preventing active discrimination; it is about working actively to make sure that potential is recognised and fostered wherever it is found (DfES, 2003, p. 67).

There is a tacit reference to meritocracy amongst the expressions of 'social justice', 'opportunity' and 'entrenchment of privilege'; higher education was

presented as a means for evening out life chances. The above excerpt also demonstrates that Government wished to take a pro-active, interventionist approach to ensuring equality through the distribution of higher education places. Whilst meritocracy is not mentioned explicitly in the 2003 White Paper, its principles were further implied within the policies for expansion:

The expansion of higher education has not yet extended to the talented and best from all backgrounds. In Britain today too many of those born into less advantaged families still see a university place as being beyond their reach, whatever their ability (DfES, 2003, p. 2).

These ideas were also reiterated later in the document:

One of our main concerns in developing the new arrangements will be to make sure that they do not discourage our brightest young people from all backgrounds entering training for, or taking jobs in, the public sector (DfES, 2003, p. 88).

In addition to the tacit alignment to the Robbins Principle on Access, the Robbins notion of maximising economic outputs by opening opportunities to 'untapped pools of talent' is evident above (Committee on Higher Education, 1963).

Beyond the economic rationale for widening participation, and to serve the objective for expansion within the context of limited state funding, an emphasis on the benefits to the individual legitimised the idea of cost sharing between the state and individual. Subsequently, students were encouraged to 'give something back' for their higher-level study (DfES, 2003, p. 81):

We now ask students going through higher education to contribute something to its cost. But there are many who had their higher education free, and have reaped enormous individual benefits from it. If we are to support the sector, we believe that it is right to ask them to contribute too. It will be made possible, as for other charities, for taxpayers, through Gift Aid and through the income tax form directly, to contribute tax repayments voluntarily to higher education institutions. Those who feel that they cannot afford to do this, or who do not wish to do so, need not contribute; but we believe that it is only right that if future graduates are to contribute, those who have already benefited should be encouraged to do so (DfES, 2003, p. 81).

### 7.3.2 Fair access

The essence of the ideas underpinning the 2003 articulation of access is captured in the first chapter, *The Need for Reform*:

Young people from professional backgrounds are over five times more likely to enter higher education than those from unskilled backgrounds. This state of affairs cannot be tolerated in a civilised society. It wastes our national talent and it is inherently socially unjust. We know that the roots of inequality are deep – in the education system, social class differences show themselves from the very earliest years. We are tackling them throughout the education system and beyond, knowing that the most important factor in getting access to higher education is earlier results at school or college. But we cannot allow this to be an excuse for failing to take decisive action to improve access to higher education. We must do everything that can be done to make sure that everyone who has the potential to benefit from a university education has the opportunity to do so (DfES, 2003, p. 17).

Similarly, the Executive Summary draws attention to existing social class inequalities as a key rationale for the *fair access* policies:

The social class gap in entry to higher education remains unacceptably wide. While many more people from all backgrounds benefit from higher education, the proportion coming from lower-income families has not substantially increased. It means a waste of potential for individuals and for the country as a whole (DfES, 2003, p. 8).

As noted previously, Government was concerned about ‘wasting’ potential and represented the need to improve access on the grounds of fairness. Again, the use of emotive language is persuasive in conveying this message. For example, Government stressed that the current situation should not be tolerated and talks of ‘decisive action to improve access to higher education’ (DfES, 2003, p. 18), perhaps indicating an appetite for affirmative action.

Whilst there is considerable focus on social class inequalities in the document, the *Fair Access* chapter re-orientated the scope of Government policies on equity to those who had not traditionally participated in higher education:

It is especially important that those who come from families without a tradition of going to higher education, and whose

aspirations are low, are supported both in achieving their full potential before university, and in aspiring to go on to further study... There are still significant barriers of aspiration facing young people from non-traditional backgrounds, as well as disabled students and those from some ethnic minority groups (DfES, 2003, p. 69).

Government's promise to make progress in fair access stressed the idea that existing patterns of access should not continue to be the norm. The White Paper aligns fair access with the notion that education offered a passage out of disadvantage and an opportunity for upward mobility. Although implicit, the *idea* of social mobility appears to have played its part here. What is more explicit is the notion that higher education was key to achieving Government's vision for social justice:

Universities are a vital gateway to opportunity and fulfilment for young people, so it is crucial that they continue to make real and sustained improvements in access (DfES, 2003, p. 17).

This message is repeated later in the Fair Access chapter, as noted below and, again, the idea of social justice, is presented almost as a justification in itself for achieving the fair access goals:

The Government's commitment to fair access will not waver. All those who have the potential to benefit from higher education should have the opportunity to do so. This is a fundamental principle, which lies at the heart of building a more socially just society, because education is the best and most reliable route out of poverty and disadvantage (DfES, 2003, p. 68).

The fair access policies are captured specifically in a list of nine objectives set out at the beginning of Chapter 6 in the document:

#### Key points and proposals

- Raising participation and standards through our reforms of secondary and further education is critical to widening access.
- But we must also raise the aspirations of schools and young people. A unified national Aimhigher programme will build better links between schools, colleges and universities, including through summer schools and a pilot programme offering students the changes to support teachers in schools and colleges.

- We will ensure that there are good-quality and accessible 'second-chance' routes into higher education for those who missed out when they were younger.
- And we will work with universities to make sure that admissions procedures are professional, fair and transparent, and use the widest possible range of information about students when making decisions.
- Institutions will be provided with better benchmarking data on which to judge progress in widening access and we will continue to support the work being done to secure fair access to the most prestigious universities.
- We will ask HEFCE to reform the access premium so that universities and colleges will be properly funded for the extra costs of attracting students from non-traditional backgrounds.
- Universities with unacceptably high dropout rates will be asked to plan improvements.
- We will appoint a Higher Education Access Regulator who will develop a framework for Access Agreements for each institution. Only institutions making satisfactory progress on access will be able to participate in the Graduate Contribution Scheme from 2006.
- We will re-introduce grants for students from the lowest income families, to help overcome their financial worries and to underpin a raising of aspirations (DfES, 2003, pp. 67-68).

As demonstrated above, Government believed a multi-faceted approach to addressing inequality in access was required. The policy levers were diverse, extensive and, perhaps, ambitious. Of note, the idea of fair access to the 'prestigious universities' was also introduced, perhaps indicating a new interpretation of distributive justice.

Amongst the policies for fair access was the idea of furthering partnerships between schools, colleges and universities. These partnerships were to combine two existing initiatives, the Excellence Challenge Programme and Partnerships for Progression, into a new Aimhigher Programme. Whilst the idea of collaboration with schools and colleges was not new, the idea of aspiration was given a new emphasis. Low aspiration and poor attainment in schools were acknowledged as two major barriers to access: 'there are still significant barriers of aspiration facing young people from non-traditional backgrounds, as well as disabled students and those from some ethnic minority groups' (DfES, 2003, p. 69).

In the context of *barriers to access*, the 2003 White Paper directs attention to admissions practices and the meritocratic principle that achievement *and* potential should govern progression to higher education:

The new Access Regulator will have a key role in overseeing fair entrance to higher education, but it is not for the government to prescribe admissions systems, for which universities themselves are responsible. We look to them to ensure that their admissions criteria are as easily understood as possible, and that admissions staff, both academic and administrative, are properly trained so that they can recognise genuine potential as well as achievement and make fair decisions. The admissions process should also be a serious one for the student – requiring commitment from them, and real investment in the decision to enter higher education (DfES, 2003, p. 72).

Higher education institutions were called on to improve transparency in their admissions requirements. Students were also asked to take personal responsibility for researching their decisions about applying for higher education courses, perhaps in recognition of the higher fees they would be expected to pay. Whilst the idea of institutional autonomy was noted, specific recommendations were made concerning how institutional admissions services should be *organised*; the idea of ‘centralised admissions’ was put forward to facilitate the ‘professionalisation’ of admissions functions:

In Oxford and Cambridge, the difficulties in running a collegiate admissions system in a sufficiently robust, rigorous and professional way to ensure that it is fair have been recognised. We welcome reforms being made by Oxford and Cambridge to co-ordinate and centralise admissions, as part of ongoing efforts to widen access, and we would support their rapid extension (DfES, 2003, p.72).

With an indirect reference to NPM, Government implied that higher education admissions should become an administrative rather than academic function on the assumption that that consistency and fairness would be better managed if centrally administered.

Entry qualifications also featured amongst the levers for fair access in 2003. Specifically, Government set out a commitment to ensure ‘second chances’ for



adults to benefit from higher education, again, relying on Access courses as an important mechanism to support this end:

Of course not all higher education entrants come straight from school or college – over half of those currently in higher education are over 25, and meeting their needs will continue to be an important function of the system in Britain and elsewhere, especially given the pressures generated by the knowledge economy and the prospect of lengthening working lives. Access to higher education courses have provided a valuable entry route into higher education for many students, particularly those mature learners who missed out at 18. However, numbers have not increased significantly over the past few years. We will ask the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education to come forward with proposals to modernise the criteria for Access Courses so that they are sufficiently flexible and attractive to meet the needs of today's adult learners (DfES, 2003, p. 71).

The objective of increasing the take-up of Access courses was presented almost exclusively from the economic perspective, so that adults could continue to update their skills, which would, in turn, ensure a flexible workforce that could adapt to changes in economic demand.

Monitoring and regulation were important elements of the 2003 access policies. The White Paper introduced language associated with 'benchmarking', 'performance indicators' and 'improvement targets', which would be overseen by HEFCE. The implementation of Access Agreements for institutions choosing to raise their tuition fees was a key lever for monitoring and regulation; Access Agreements would require institutions not only to demonstrate how they were encouraging applications from a wider pool of students but also how they would support these students *during* their studies. Alongside proposals to re-introduce a means-tested grant for students from the lowest income backgrounds, Government expected higher education institutions to implement a range of initiatives to support students from all backgrounds:

Effective support mechanisms within institutions are essential to attracting and retaining vulnerable students, offering pastoral, academic and financial advice services. Many institutions have already recognised that this can be done very effectively through one stop shops, or other integrated facilities (DfES, 2003, p. 71).

Access Agreements were intended to safeguard against the potential risks for access-equity of increasing higher tuition fees. Again, the use of emotive and relatively informal language is evident:

We do recognise, though, that a wholly unregulated variable fee scheme could pose dangers to access, with universities setting fee levels that some students simply could not afford. Our challenge has been to combine the benefits of variable contributions while making certain that fair access is not threatened (DfES, 2003, p. 85).

What is clear from the 2003 White Paper is that Government perceived itself as having a significant role in achieving fair access:

Realising our vision will take time. Having presented a radical picture of a freer future, it is the duty of government to make sure that the transition is managed carefully and sensibly so that change is not destabilising. So in some areas government will want to support the way in which institutions move towards new freedoms, and develop new patterns of provision. Government also has to retain a role because it is the only body that can balance competing interests between different stakeholders. It will also have responsibility to intervene when universities fail to provide adequate opportunities or when access, quality or standards are at risk (DfES, 2003, p. 21).

As well as asserting its responsibilities for equity, Government mooted the idea of sanctions for institutions unable to demonstrate progress in the areas of fair access and widening participation. At the same time, higher education institutions were to be offered more freedom in the proposed fees regime.

#### **7.4 Related themes: variable fees, cost effectiveness and competition**

Aside from *fair access*, fairness was a guiding principle for the other policies set out in the 2003 White Paper. The idea of fairness was presented as a justification for undergraduate students contributing more to their tuition fees. As such, Government recommended that, rather than the state meeting the costs of expansion, students should contribute further to the cost of their tuition:

The principle that it is right for students to make a contribution to the costs of their course was established by Lord Dearing in 1997. It is now generally accepted and raises £450 million a year. But universities have asked us whether students might be asked

to contribute more to the costs of their education (DfES, 2003, p. 82).

In addition, Government presented the deregulation of undergraduate tuition fees as a new policy requested by universities. Although the idea was to, perhaps, remove the state as the chief driver for this policy, universities would undoubtedly need a higher contribution from tuition fees to help replace the widening gap in state funding. Here, the way in which the student finance proposals were presented does considerable policy work to frame Government's objectives in a more palpable form; constructing them as policies the universities wanted was, perhaps, intended to encourage their wider acceptance.

As part of the new regime of variable fees, higher education institutions would be able to request a contribution of up to £3,000 per annum for its undergraduate courses (DfES, 2003, p. 9). Given the benefits to the individual, the case for this new policy was put forward in the chapter on *Freedoms and funding*:

Currently students who pay the full £1,100 fee are only contributing about a quarter of the average cost of their university teaching and education – the taxpayer still pays the rest. Our student support package is one of the most generous in the world. Graduates derive substantial benefits from having gained a degree, including wider career opportunities and the financial benefits that generally follow. On average those with a higher education qualification earn around 50% more than non-graduates.

Given these benefits to an individual from the investment in a university education, the government has decided that it is fair to allow universities, if they so determine, to ask students to make an increased contribution – as they do in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States. We believe that this will also have the benefit of enhancing the independence of universities by making them less reliant on government funding (DfES, 2003, p. 83).

Higher education was presented as a personal investment alongside the notion of economic freedom, and the idea that the state and taxpayer should pay less. Government suggested that freedom from the state would encourage institutions to make efficiencies and improve their management arrangements through the

forces of competition. Elements of NPM discourse can also be detected in the justification for opening higher education up to market principles:

Greater freedom and competition will compel institutions to improve their efficiency and management. Although there is some excellent leadership and management in the sector, some weaker institutions have been propped up rather than turned round. This is not in the interests of the student or the sector as a whole. There is still more scope to rationalise resources to improve cost effectiveness (DfES, 2003, p. 80).

Government acknowledged the complexities associated with the reforms, including those involving access: 'there is no simple means of achieving wider access' (DfES, 2003, p. 68). Furthermore, an observation was made that 'structural change can be a formidable undertaking' (p. 80). By framing the programme of reforms as complex and challenging, Government was, perhaps, able to justify more radical change, not least the rebalancing of the relationships between the state, higher education and market through further limits to state funding, higher tuition fees and more competition between institutions.

Together with the discourses promoting competition, the 2003 White Paper further stressed the economic and social functions of higher education perceived by Government and articulated these through the aforementioned notion of lifelong learning:

Today's generation of students will need to return to learning – full-time or part-time – on more than one occasion across their lifetime in order to refresh their knowledge, upgrade their skills and sustain their employability. Such independent learners investing in the continuous improvement of their skills will underpin innovation and enterprise in the economy and society. Lifelong learning therefore implies a fundamental shift from the 'once in a lifetime' approach to higher education to one of educational progression linked to a process of continuous personal and professional development (DfES, 2003, p. 16).

Nevertheless, the overarching rationale for the policies on access and participation, particularly around lifelong learning, was still economic (in the form of closing higher level skills gaps and increasing global competitiveness):

The sector has embraced lifelong learning, research, knowledge transfer, social inclusion and regional economic development. There is a broad consensus within higher education that all of these elements are both welcome and necessary. However, it is unreasonable to expect all higher education institutions to sustain all of these activities simultaneously at global, and not just national, levels of excellence. No higher education system in the world is organised in this way. Rather, scarce resources are applied in such a way as to produce a focus on comparative advantage: individual institutions focus on what they do best, while the sector as a whole achieves this much wider range of objectives (DfES, 2003, p. 20).

Moreover, Government tasked higher education institutions with delivering the reforms and achieving expansion within new fiscal constraints and a context of 'scarce resource'. This implied continued interest in institutional management arrangements, this time to ensure cost effectiveness and efficiency in the allocation and monitoring of resources.

## **7.5 Conclusions**

The 2003 White Paper is framed predominantly by concerns for the financial sustainability of higher education. There is also recognition that, whilst student numbers had grown, the long established inequalities associated with access and participation had not been fully addressed. The main drivers for the White Paper were, however, to introduce variable tuition fees and boost the supply of higher-level skills in the economy. Within a more ideological framework, aided by the vision for higher education and more descriptive genre of the White Paper, Government initiated some affirmative steps aimed at addressing inequality. While these policies were supported by notions of social justice and fairness, the discourses framing the expressions of fair access and widening participation were guided primarily by the principles of competition, cost-effectiveness and individual benefit.

## 8. Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System (2011)

### Introduction

This chapter describes how notions of access-participation-mobility are represented in the 2011 White Paper, *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System* (DBIS, 2011a). The reading of the document gives attention to specific and indirect references to these concepts and the ideas evident in their articulation. Details of the context of the 2011 White Paper are set out first. Given another change in Government and the time elapsed between 2003 and 2011, the policy and socio-economic developments during this period are considerable and extensive.

### 8.1 The 2011 White Paper in context

The Department for Business, Innovation Skills (DBIS) published *Students at the Heart of the System* in June 2011. While Gordon Brown had replaced Tony Blair in June 2007 as the Labour Prime Minister, a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition came to Government after the General Election in May 2010. David Cameron of the Conservative Party became the new Prime Minister, with his Deputy Nick Clegg, of the Liberal Democrats. The 2003-2011 period was, therefore, influenced politically by all three of the major parties in England.

The global financial crisis of 2008 and 2009, originating in North America, had drastically affected the economy in England. Following some 15 years of economic growth, a severe recession led to drops in productivity, which far surpassed the recessions in the 1980s and early 1990s (Gregg and Wadsworth, 2010). As a consequence, unemployment rose sharply and, by the time of the General Election in 2010, the economy had not yet recovered. The crisis set the foreground for the next phase of higher education reform in England, characterised by deep public spending cuts to core public services (including education).

The period between 2003 and 2011 was also characterised by significant policy change in higher education, owing largely to the 2004 Higher Education Act. The

Act introduced three major reforms in England, which had been recommended by the 2003 White Paper. Firstly, it was agreed that variable tuition fees for undergraduate study, capped at £3,000 per annum, would be introduced in September 2006. Secondly, approval was given for the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) to be established and tasked with promoting fair access for lower income backgrounds and other under-represented groups as well as monitoring institutional Access Agreements. Thirdly, creation of the new agency for managing student complaints, the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA), was agreed.

In addition to the higher education reforms, the eight years between 2003 and 2011 saw a further proliferation in 'official' policy texts associated with higher education and equity, both as combined and separate topics of Government interest. As noted in Chapter 2, the Schwartz Review published its final report in September 2004 (DfES, 2004). Amongst other recommendations, Schwartz called on institutions to adopt a contextual approach to their admissions decisions to take account of socio-economic and educational background:

The Steering Group does not want to bias admissions in favour of applicants from certain backgrounds or schools. The Group does, however, believe that it is fair and appropriate to consider contextual factors as well as formal educational achievement, given the variation in learners' opportunities and circumstances. The Group also wants to ensure that the factors considered in the assessment process are accurate and relevant and allow all applicants equal opportunity to demonstrate achievements and potential. This is facilitated by 'holistic assessment,' or taking into account all relevant factors, including the context of applicants' achievements, backgrounds and relevant skills. 'Broad brush' approaches are generally not appropriate; applicants must be assessed as individuals (DfES, 2004, p. 33).

Whilst the principle of institutional autonomy was still upheld by Government, the *Schwartz Report* was the first policy document to recommend how *admissions decisions* might be made. Indeed, the *Schwartz Review* was the first Government commissioned enquiry dedicated specifically to higher education admissions. Moreover, it was the first official report to engage directly with the notion of affirmative action. As such, the Schwartz Review put higher education admissions firmly on the Government agenda as a policy lever for achieving fair access to higher education.

Other policy documents published between 2003 and 2011 included the pan-department White Paper *New Opportunities: Fair Chances for the Future* published in January 2009. *New Opportunities* was a joint venture of the newly formed Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and other Government departments covering health, work and pensions and justice. The 2009 White Paper formally introduced the notion of *social mobility* as a policy concern, putting it forward as a means of overcoming the socio-economic challenges set by the global fiscal crisis:

With the measures in this White Paper we will not just manage the downturn fairly, but make of it the beginning of a new era for our nation – with an historic commitment to the greatest possible achievement of modern progressive politics as we lay the foundations of true social mobility and social justice in modern Britain (Cabinet Office, 2009, p. 2).

*New Opportunities* combined the motifs of *social mobility* with *social justice* to reinforce its representation of higher education as an important vehicle for achieving upward mobility across society:

While studies show social mobility did not increase in the eighties and early nineties, new evidence suggests this is beginning to change. The latest academic research shows there are encouraging signs, with success in education becoming less dependent on a person's social background, more young people from low-income backgrounds going to university, and evidence suggesting that improvements in earnings mobility are helping people to get on in work (Cabinet Office, 2009, p. 4).

As the above demonstrates, education had become central to Government policy and debate on equity. These debates were also being shaped by the discourses favoured by Gordon Brown, as Prime Minister, which advocated the ideas of *social justice* and *fairness*. The emergence of these policy motifs was further evidenced by an earlier 'discussion paper' published in November 2008 by the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit Social Mobility Project, and which had informed the content of the *New Opportunities* White Paper (Cabinet Office, 2008). This paper set out Government's objectives for achieving social mobility:



Social mobility has two core aspects:

- ensuring there are better jobs for each successive generation, so our children can do better than us.
- making sure that there are fairer chances, so that everyone has the opportunity to access those jobs in line with their potential (Cabinet Office, 2008, p. 5).

As illustrated, social mobility had become the preferred motif for describing a broad range of political levers associated with minimising poverty and supporting socio-economic improvements. Specifically, *Getting on, getting ahead* highlighted the over-representation of young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds in vocational education and in the cohort dropping out of education and training completely (Cabinet Office, 2008, p. 8). Improving attainment at school as a means of increasing the chances of progression to higher education, therefore, featured prominently amongst the ‘drivers’ for social mobility in the 2008 and subsequent Government papers.

In addition to a change in Government, the period between 2003 and 2011 saw considerable change in the organisation of Government responsibilities. In 2007 the Department for Education was disbanded and the separate Departments for Children, Schools and Families (DSCF), and for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) were formed. This change separated the state responsibilities for school and higher education. DIUS was, however, short lived and, by June 2009, a new Department for Business Innovation and Skills (DBIS) was created after the merger of DIUS and the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform. Peter Mandelson was nominated Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills. In 2010, the new Coalition appointed two ministerial leads for DBIS; David Willetts, the Conservative Minister for Universities and Science, and Vince Cable, the Liberal Democrat Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills. Furthermore, policy on social mobility was allocated to the Cabinet Office, under the direction of Nick Clegg, while policy for social justice was placed amongst the responsibilities of the Department for Work and Pensions, led by the Conservative Minister Iain Duncan Smith.

Soon after the appointment of Peter Mandelson in 2009 the ‘framework’ document, described in Chapter 4, *Higher Ambitions: The Future of Universities in*

*a Knowledge Economy* was published (DBIS, 2009). *Higher Ambitions* reinforced several messages of the earlier New Labour papers and reviews, including those of the *Leitch Review of Skills* (Leitch, 2006) and the 2003 White Paper (DfES, 2003). In addition, it set out agreed principles for how the system should continue to widen participation and promote fair access in the context of increasing global competition and ever shrinking public funds:

This framework makes it clear that the Government will not relent on its commitment to wider participation and fair access to our universities. Higher education equips people with the skills that globalisation and a knowledge economy demand, and thereby gives access to many of this country's best jobs. Everyone, irrespective of background, has a right to a fair chance to gain those advantages. This is vital not just as a question of social justice and social mobility but also for meeting the economy's needs for high-level skills (DBIS, 2009, p. 3).

As demonstrated above, *Higher Ambitions* presented higher education as a mechanism for mediating social mobility and social justice. Furthermore, and illustrated by the following excerpt, Mandelson endorsed the idea put forward by Schwartz of *affirmative action* in higher education admissions:

Many universities are developing new ways to use contextual data in their admissions procedures to assess the aptitude and potential to succeed of those from poor backgrounds. We believe this is a valid approach and hope that all universities will consider it (DBIS, 2009, p. 10).

In January 2009 social mobility had become even more central to the Government agenda, with the commissioning of the Panel of Fair Access to the Professions and appointment of its director Alan Milburn, as special advisor on social mobility. The first report of the panel highlighted 'barriers' to the professions experienced by under-represented groups, namely women, black and ethnic minority groups and those from working class backgrounds. Milburn also presented the Government aspiration for a 'genuinely meritocratic society' (p. 18), which Blair had promoted extensively, on the rationale outlined below:

It is not that many young people do not have aspirations. It is that they are blocked. It is not that they do not have talent. To coin a phrase, Britain's got talent – lots of it. It is not ability that

is unevenly distributed in our society. It is opportunity. Of course there is no single lever that on its own can prise open the professions. No single organisation can make it happen either. It is far too complex an issue for that. It is as much about family networks as it is careers advice, individual aspiration as school standards, university admission procedures as well as career development opportunities (Milburn, 2009, p. 7).

Other official reports published around the same time by the Director of OFFA (Harris, 2010) and national interest groups (Sutton Trust, 2010) underlined a growing concern, which had been mentioned briefly in the 2003 White Paper, for patterns of uneven participation in the most selective universities. In addition, a review of postgraduate education was commissioned shortly after the Milburn Review published its report, amid concerns for the competitiveness of the UK postgraduate offer and barriers to participation in postgraduate study. The review, led by Professor Adrian Smith, a statistician and Director General of Science and Research at DBIS, culminated in a final report, *One Step Beyond: making the most of postgraduate education*, released in March 2010. The report identified a lack of robust research into the social backgrounds of postgraduate students and suggested that the existing barriers to undergraduate study might be compounded at the postgraduate level by further increases in undergraduate tuition fees.

One of the most significant policy developments immediately prior to the 2011 White Paper was the publication in December 2010 of the final report of the *Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance (The Browne Review)*. As Chapter 2 notes, Labour had initiated the review by Lord John Browne due to fresh concerns for the financial sustainability of higher education. One of the main recommendations of *The Browne Review* was to lift the cap on undergraduate tuition fees from £3,290 to £9,000 per annum. Widespread objections amongst students and the higher education sector led to a series of protests (some leading to violence) in several major UK cities in autumn 2010. The outcomes of the Review also sparked dismay amongst many Liberal Democrat supporters, given the promises that had been made in the Party's pre-election manifesto to 'phase out tuition fees within 6 years' (Liberal Democrat Party, 2010, p. 39).

In other areas, the theme of social mobility, introduced under the Labour leadership continued to feature in the policies of the new Coalition Government. In April 2011 the Cabinet Office, under the direction of Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, published the first Government strategy on social mobility. *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers: A Strategy for Social Mobility* (Cabinet Office, 2011) set out a vision for improving social mobility, largely on the principles of *fairness*:

A fair society is an open society, one in which every individual is free to succeed. That is why improving social mobility is the principal goal of the Government's social policy. No one should be prevented from fulfilling their potential by the circumstances of their birth. What ought to count is how hard you work and the skills and talents you possess, not the school you went to or the jobs your parents did. This strategy sets out our vision of a socially mobile country, and how it can become a reality (Cabinet Office, 2011, p. 5).

The Strategy identified a key Government objective to address unrelenting inequalities linked to socio-economic background. It noted that 25 per cent of children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds were not meeting expected attainment levels by the end of primary school, compared with just 3 per cent from well off backgrounds. These disparities continued into secondary education and were shaping subsequent patterns of higher education progression. The Strategy also showed that, while only 7 per cent of the population attended independent schools, this group represented over half of the top echelon of most professions (Cabinet Office, 2011, p. 5). Akin to the *New Opportunities* White Paper, the Strategy called for action at all life stages (a 'lifecycle approach') and, specifically, fairer access to the most selective universities:

Every child in our country deserves a world-class education. The education system should challenge low aspirations and expectations, dispelling the myth that those from poorer backgrounds cannot aim for top universities and professional careers (Cabinet Office, 2011, p. 6).

*Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers* initiated the creation of the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission soon after its publication, to monitor progress against specific social mobility indicators. One such indicator included closing the gap

between state and independent school pupils progressing to the 33% most selective institutions.

With continued interest in social mobility, DBIS commissioned an academic literature review on the issue in 2011 (Crawford et al, 2011). Government also reappointed Milburn in 2012 to lead on social mobility, this time as head of the new Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission. Soon afterwards the Commission published another report on fair access to the professions (Milburn, 2012a). In the same period, DBIS published a set of guidance for the Director of Fair Access (OFFA) in February 2011 calling specifically on OFFA to support the social mobility agenda:

We want to make Britain a more open and meritocratic society, in which talent is not wasted. More specifically, we want to:

- increase social mobility by enabling more people from disadvantaged backgrounds to enter higher education, and subsequently gain employment in the professions and other rewarding, well paid occupations;
- make greater progress in extending fair access for applicants of the highest ability to the most selective higher education institutions;
- continue to make progress in widening participation to higher education at large, attracting a higher proportion of students from under-represented groups (DBIS, 2011b, p. 3).

*Social mobility, meritocracy, fair access and widening participation* were presented to OFFA as mutually reinforcing policy aims. Within this discourse, the OFFA Guidance was drawn up largely to provide new principles for monitoring Access Agreements, but also further endorsed contextual admissions, recommending institutions take more proactive steps to identify potential.

In summary, there was a significant amount of policy development between the publication of the 2003 and 2011 White Papers. In particular, social mobility had become a leading theme in official policy by 2011. Although policy concerns for equity focused new attention on admissions, affirmative action and social mobility, the Browne Review played a key role in setting the tone for the 2011 White Paper. Indeed, the main purpose of the 2011 White Paper was to mobilise

the majority of the Browne recommendations and introduce a new set of financial reforms.

## 8.2 Genre, scope and aims

*Students at the Heart of the System* is slightly shorter in length than the 2003 White Paper, comprising 79 pages, six chapters, a Foreword, Executive Summary and Annex as follows:

- Foreword
- Executive Summary
- 1. Sustainable and fair funding
- 2. Well-informed students driving teaching excellence
- 3. A better student experience and better qualified graduates
- 4. A diverse and responsive sector
- 5. Improved social mobility through fair access
- 6. A new, fit-for-purpose regulatory framework
- Annex
- Consultation on our proposals for reform
- Glossary of abbreviations (DBIS, 2011a).

The penultimate chapter is devoted to *social mobility* and *fair access*, while the chapters covering the new funding regime and the higher education market feature earlier in the document.

The scope of the 2011 White Paper is defined clearly on the first page of the document, illustrating the now separate policies of the UK nations, yet recognising some areas of commonality:

Higher education is a devolved matter in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland so this is a White Paper for England.  
... As we deliver these reforms, we will work closely with the devolved administrations on our areas of shared interest, particularly where this involves delivery bodies and other organisations with a remit that goes wider than just England (DBIS, 2011a, p. 1).

*Students at the Heart of the System* did not follow a higher education Green Paper. The opportunity for consultation at the end of the document appears to have replaced the function of the Green Paper in 2011. Whilst coverage of the higher education sector in its entirety was inferred, this White Paper focuses primarily on undergraduate study (particularly in the universities) with little, if

any, policies on postgraduate study or further education, including higher education provided in further education colleges. A short section on *Access to postgraduate study* in Chapter 5 references Milburn's report on fair access to the professions. However, rather than making specific recommendations for postgraduate study, Government asked HEFCE to monitor the *potential* impacts of the proposed undergraduate reforms on patterns of postgraduate participation.

As for genre, *Students at the Heart of the System* is a departure away from the shorter, less descriptive 1987 and 1991 White Papers of the Conservative Government. Whilst more verbose in nature, the policies of the 2011 White Paper are not framed around an overall vision for higher education. Notwithstanding this, the use of collective nouns, particularly in the opening sections, presents some clear outcomes that were anticipated by the Coalition: 'we want to see more investment, greater diversity and less centralised control' (DBIS, 2011a, p. 2). The phrases 'we want', 'we will', 'we must' feature throughout the Foreword to the document, perhaps to demonstrate a unified approach within the recently elected Coalition Government.

The metaphors used in the 2011 White Paper were relatively limited yet those featured are mechanistic in character and, as in the 2003 White Paper, evocative of the industrial revolution. Students should be in 'the driving seat' of the higher education system and higher education is the 'engine' of the economy (DBIS, 2011a, p. 2). Metaphors were also used in the representation of social mobility and fair access, to describe higher education as 'a powerful engine of social mobility' (DBIS, 2011a, p. 54). *Students at the Heart of the System* cross-references the earlier schools White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching*, which also described schools as 'engines of social mobility' (DfE, 2010, p. 6).

The aims of the 2011 White Paper are presented in the form of three 'challenges':

First, putting higher education on a sustainable footing (by implementing a new financial model and new number controls). We inherited the largest budget deficit in post-war history, requiring spending cuts across government. By shifting public spending away from teaching grants and towards repayable loans, we have ensured that higher education receives the funding it needs even as substantial savings are made to public

expenditure. Second, institutions must deliver a better student experience (better information about choices). Third, institutions must take more responsibility for increasing social mobility (DBIS, 2011a, p. 4).

Evidently the main driver was economic, with the student experience and social mobility positioned behind.

Framed by the three challenges, the themes of the 2011 White Paper were concerned with student finance and the financial crisis (namely, a withdrawal of state finance), the student experience and teaching quality, marketisation (responding to student demand and increasing competition) and social mobility. These themes are captured in the Conclusion to the Executive Summary:

Our reforms are designed to deliver a more responsive higher education sector in which funding follows the decisions of learners and successful institutions are freed to thrive; in which there is a new focus on the student experience and the quality of teaching and in which further education colleges and other providers are encouraged to offer a diverse range of higher education provision.

The overall goal is higher education that is more responsive to student choice that provides a better student experience and that helps improve social mobility (DBIS, 2011a, p. 8).

*Students at the Heart of the System* combined a diverse range of policies underpinned by several, relatively disparate drivers. However, those associated with the economy, efficiency and marketisation featured at the forefront, not only in the structure of the White Paper document, but also in the discourses promoting the idea of ‘freeing’ institutions from state controls.

### **8.3 Representation of access-participation-mobility**

#### **8.3.1 Social mobility and fair access**

Whilst *widening participation* is mentioned in the 2011 policies, *social mobility* and *fair access* are the two key motifs, with social mobility taking the lead. To compensate for the lifting of the tuition fee cap, the White Paper asked institutions opting to charge the highest fee to meet ‘tougher conditions on widening participation and fair access’ (DBIS, 2011a, p. 15). The financial reforms, therefore, appear to have been an important driver underpinning the 2011



policies on access-participation-mobility. Combined, these policies were affiliated directly with the Robbins Principle on Access, as demonstrated below:

Ultimately, the best way to widen participation is to ensure there are sufficient higher education places for those qualified. Subject to expenditure constraints we endorse the principle enunciated in the Robbins report that “courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and wish to do so”. The number of unsuccessful applicants has risen sharply in recent years. However, despite the funding changes, each undergraduate place has a substantial cost for taxpayers and we need a more cost-effective sector if we are to spread the opportunity more widely (DBIS, 2011a, p. 7).

The representation of the Robbins Principle in 2011 was set against the broader concerns for the economy (following the financial crisis). At the same time, the principle of fair access was almost presented as a rationale for driving up efficiencies; the aim being to make the available opportunities go further, in the context of less financial input from the state. Indeed, Government framed its access policies primarily around the idea of redistributing opportunity, rather than general expansion for all. Considerable emphasis was, therefore, given in the White Paper to the patterns of uneven distribution by locality and socio-economic background:

There remain very significant differences in the chances of participating in higher education depending on where you live. Currently fewer than one in five young people from the most disadvantaged areas enter higher education compared to more than one in two for the most advantaged areas. The participation rate of disadvantaged young people at institutions requiring higher entry tariffs remained almost flat over recent years at three per cent (DBIS, 2011a, p. 55).

As the above and following excerpts illustrate, the fair access and social mobility policies in 2011 were predominantly about students living in low participation areas and/or with lower income backgrounds entering the more elite universities (rather than increasing participation in higher education at its broadest):

The most disadvantaged young people are seven times less likely than the most advantaged to attend the most selective institutions. This is not good enough. Individuals with the highest

academic potential should have a fair route into higher education, and the most selective institutions in particular (DBIS, 2011a, pp. 6-7).

In this way, the 2011 White Paper was consistent with the messages expressed in the earlier schools White Paper (DfE, 2010), which drew attention to patterns of under-representation amongst disadvantaged students (from low income backgrounds) in the most prestigious universities (namely Oxford and Cambridge):

In each year around 600,000 children enter state education. Of those, the poorest 80,000 are eligible for free school meals. In the last year for which we have figures just 40 of those 80,000 made it to Oxbridge. More children from an individual public school, such as Winchester, made it to those top universities than from the entire population of young people eligible for that basic benefit. What makes this tragedy sadder still is that, far from opportunity becoming more equal, our society is becoming less socially mobile. In the year before last, the number of children eligible for free school meals who made it to Oxford or Cambridge was actually 12.5 per cent higher – at 45 (DfE, 2010, p. 6).

Set against the concern for distribution, *Students at the Heart of the System* was the first higher education White Paper to reference *social mobility* specifically, and to express it as a specific policy aspiration for higher education. Indeed, the Foreword presented the idea early on in the document that higher education must ‘foster social mobility’ (DBIS, 2011a, p. 3). Furthermore, *social mobility* almost acts as short hand for the policies on *fair access* and *widening participation* in 2011.

To affirm the Coalition’s interpretation of social mobility, Chapter 5 of the White Paper provides a detailed definition:

Social mobility is a measure of how possible it is for people to improve their position in society. It can be inter-generational (i.e. the extent to which people’s success in life is determined by who their parents are) or intra-generational (i.e. the extent to which individuals improve their position during their working lives, irrespective of where they started off). It can be “relative”, which refers to the comparative chances of people with different backgrounds ending up in certain social or income groups or “absolute”, which refers to the extent to which all

people are able to do better than their parents (DBIS, 2011a, p. 54).

The White Paper went further to indicate which *type* of social mobility Government was concerned with:

Absolute social mobility is important. However, high levels of absolute social mobility can be driven by, for example, the growth of white-collar jobs and so can go hand in hand with a society in which background still has an unfair influence on life chances. Our focus is on relative social mobility. For any given level of skill and ambition, regardless of an individual's background, everyone should have a fair chance of getting the job they want or reaching a higher income bracket (DBIS, 2011a, p. 54).

The Coalition aligned itself with the idea of 'relative' social mobility; it wanted background to have less influence on career, income and social status outcomes. *Background* is not, however, qualified here in the document and could include familial and social background, (such as social class, parental income, education, personal circumstances, ethnic origin and locality). Perhaps, the intention of *not* defining background was to appeal to the widest audience possible, rather than narrowing the agenda to just one or two specific factors.

Despite the initial, broad interpretation of mobility illustrated above, the White Paper goes on to specifically emphasise access amongst 'low-income' backgrounds:

Higher education can be a powerful engine of social mobility, enabling able young people from low-income backgrounds to earn more than their parents and providing a route into the professions for people from non-professional backgrounds. But as we set out in our recent strategy for social mobility, *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers*, there are significant barriers in the way of bright young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds accessing higher education. This chapter sets out how we will promote fairer access without undermining academic excellence or institutional autonomy. We expect higher education institutions to be active partners, challenged and supported by a strengthened Office for Fair Access (OFFA) (DBIS, 2011a, p. 54).

The idea of higher education as a vehicle for social mobility reinforced similar expressions evident in the earlier policy documents of the end of the New Labour and beginning of the Coalition Governments, including the Milburn reports and Social Mobility Strategy (Milburn, 2009, 2012a; Cabinet Office, 2011).

Overall, the articulations of fair access and social mobility in 2011 were relatively limited in their reference to related concepts. For instance, terms such as *social justice, meritocracy, democracy, cohesion, citizenship, and social harmony* do not feature in the document. Moreover, the idea of higher education as a collective, social good seems to have been a less important theme in 2011. Instead, the individual benefits of higher education were promoted, as demonstrated by the title of the document, which placed ‘students at the heart of the system’. Moreover, the focus on *social mobility* illustrated a central concern for the *individual*.

The individual benefits of higher education were further highlighted by the proposed financial reforms, which would pass the cost of higher education almost entirely to the student (the *individual*). Along with a clear economic rationale for the new fees regime, the omission of any reference to the role of the state in financially supporting higher education added weight to the idea of higher education as a private good in 2011:

It fell to the Coalition to receive the report by the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance (the “Browne Review”), which was established by the previous Government. We were given the report in an environment when public funding had to be reduced and we accepted the main thrust – that the beneficiaries of higher education would need to make a larger contribution towards its costs. We proposed a new system for higher education funding which gives more support to students for their living costs, ensures that no first-time undergraduate student will have to pay fees up-front and ensures graduates will only be expected to pay a portion of their salary towards the cost of their education once they are earning over £21,000. Many part-time and distance-learning students will become entitled to tuition loans to cover full tuition costs for the first time. In short, we proposed a “pay as you earn” system, with many of the best features of a graduate tax but without its defects, which ensures that people are only ever asked to contribute towards the cost of their education, once they can afford to do so (DBIS, 2011a, p. 4).

### **8.3.2 Policy levers for social mobility and fair access**

Several levers for achieving fairer access and social mobility are outlined in the fifth chapter of the White Paper, under the heading 'a new framework for widening participation and fair access'. These levers were further rationalised by the patterns of inequality associated with low-income background, as noted previously:

Analysis by OFFA shows that the relative chance of people from low-income backgrounds studying at the most selective third of universities has worsened. The most advantaged 20 per cent of the young population were around six times more likely to attend a selective university in the mid-1990s but seven times more likely by the mid-2000s (DBIS, 2011a, pp. 55-56).

The mechanisms proposed for remedying these inequalities relied heavily on the existing Access Agreements and a renewed focus on outreach activity with schools and colleges, two policies, which had been introduced by the previous Labour Government:

To help make progress in the numbers of young people entering higher education from disadvantaged backgrounds, and in particular to the most selective universities, we are establishing a new framework, which places more responsibility on universities and colleges to widen participation. We will ensure that widening participation for students from all backgrounds remains a key strategic objective for all higher education institutions. All universities will produce widening participation strategic assessments, with HEFCE and OFFA continuing to work together to ensure coherence and avoid duplication with Access Agreements. They are encouraged to draw on the evaluation of outreach activities and build on good practice developed through the Aimhigher programme and their own initiatives to further develop their work in this area (DBIS, 2011a, p. 56).

In 2011, the Access Agreement became an important instrument for supporting fair access. To counter the possible adverse effects of raising undergraduate tuition fees (which could manifest themselves in the form of new barriers to access), Government recommended a larger budget and new powers for OFFA to play a more directive role in guiding institutional spend on fair access initiatives:

We are serious about ensuring that higher education institutions actively seek to attract students from disadvantaged backgrounds and expect that the new Access Agreements and a

stronger role for the Office for Fair Access will promote this (DBIS, 2011a, p. 65).

The White Paper acknowledged the need for interventions to support entry into and retention within higher education, although there was a specific focus on the former i.e. promoting *fair access* for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Government called on 'all institutions charging more than the basic £6,000 annual tuition charge to demonstrate what more they will do to *attract* students from under-represented and disadvantaged groups' (DBIS, 2011a, p. 60).

Coupled with new responsibilities for OFFA and an augmented role for Access Agreements, quality in school standards and attainment in schools were presented as other levers for promoting social mobility and fairer access:

In The Importance of Teaching, we set out our vision for schools as engines of social mobility, helping children and young people to achieve their aspirations. Improving children's attainment at every stage as they progress through school is the most important thing we can do to increase their chances of accessing higher education, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. We will do this through a relentless focus on improving teacher quality and establishing a strong, autonomous school system that is accountable to parents, pupils and communities.

We are reforming performance tables so that schools are no longer rewarded for encouraging young people to pursue courses and qualifications that are not recognised by universities and employers. Instead, we believe all pupils should have a broad education with a sound grasp of the basics. The subjects covered by the English Baccalaureate match closely those which the Russell Group of universities indicated recently would be sensible choices for young people wishing to keep their higher education options as open as possible (DBIS, 2011a, p. 57).

Government acknowledged that the type of qualification and grades achieved played a key function in mediating access and, in turn, influencing the chances of successful participation in higher education and upward mobility. There appears to be an implicit reference to meritocratic principles here; that appropriate qualifications should continue to govern access to higher education. In addition, the proposals described above introduced a new performance measure for schools based on achievement in five GCSE subjects (English, maths, the sciences,

geography or history, and a language). Government suggested this new measure reflected Russell Group entry requirements, which served to further emphasise its concern for access to the elite universities.

In addition to standards in school, Access courses feature in the 2011 White Paper in a relatively short section capturing a factual description of the purpose of Access courses and the nature of current take up:

The Skills Funding Agency funds Access to Higher Education Diplomas to support students who have few, if any, qualifications, such as adults who left school early or have been out of education for a number of years. These are targeted at groups that are under-represented in higher education and are designed and developed by local further and higher education institutions working in partnership (DIBS 2011a, p. 62).

There was no explicit commitment from Government to further expand Access courses. Instead, the closing paragraph to the section on Access courses promised to investigate why there had been growth in recent take up, perhaps indicating an intention to maintain the current status quo, rather than take pro-active steps to generate more demand.

Other entry routes into higher education do not feature extensively in the 2011 White Paper. Vocational routes are mentioned in the context of promoting more flexible routes directly into the professions, amongst the policies on diversification and marketisation in Chapter 4 of the document, *A Diverse and Response Sector*:

For many people, entry to higher education does not follow the traditional and well-established route of A-levels followed by a full-time, residential, three-year degree. Some choose to undertake a foundation degree, Higher National Diploma (HND), Higher National Certificate (HNC) or Apprenticeship, while others enter higher education later in life after a period in the workforce, or move onto a higher education qualification having already undertaken some vocational learning. Some want to work or take care of their family alongside studying part-time while others want to study more intensively, compressing a three-year degree into one or two years (DBIS, 2011a, p. 46).

Under the guises of diversification, differentiation and choice in the market, the White Paper also expressed a broad commitment to the different types of higher education, including vocational courses. In tandem, it reiterated messages of earlier White Papers (notably 1987 and 1991), that parity should be encouraged between all providers of higher education, with the specific intention of ensuring fair competition between institutions:

To achieve this choice for students, all higher education providers, whatever type of course they offer, must be able to compete on a level playing field. At the moment, the system treats them very differently; current rules for controlling student numbers and awarding degrees can make it difficult for colleges and alternative providers to compete with universities for students (DBIS, 2011a, p. 47).

Specifically in relation to *fair access*, the 2011 White Paper took forward, and accelerated, the affirmative policies introduced by the previous Labour Government, in particular, on contextualised admissions:

The use of contextual data to identify candidates with the ability and potential to succeed on a particular course or at a particular institution is not a new phenomenon. Many institutions have been using such information on the basis that there is good evidence that for some students, exam grades alone are not the best predictor of potential to succeed at university. The Government believes that this is a valid and appropriate way for institutions to broaden access while maintaining excellence, so long as individuals are considered on their merits, and institutions' procedures are fair, transparent and evidence based (DBIS, 2011a, p. 58).

The phrasing used in the 2011 White Paper is very similar that of the Guidance to the Director of Fair Access, published earlier in the same year (DBIS 2011b). Similarly, the idea of institutional autonomy was repeated 'the Director of Fair Access will continue to have a duty to protect academic freedom including an institution's right to decide who to admit and on what basis' (DBIS, 2011a, p. 7).

Furthering the theme of higher education admissions as a lever for fair access, the 2011 White Paper floated the idea of 'post-qualification admissions' (PQA). PQA was not a new phenomenon and had featured in long-standing equity-access debates, co-ordinated predominantly by UCAS. The case put forward by



Government suggested that it would be fairer *and* more efficient to base admissions decisions on *achieved* rather than *predicted* grades:

The potential benefits of such a system could be significant. Removing the uncertainty of conditional offers and predicted grades would mean candidates would be able to make more focused applications based on a match between their qualifications and the entry requirements for particular courses. This could give candidates more time to consider their choice of course and institution, help promote fair access and be more efficient. A system of this kind might remove some of the stressful uncertainty from the current application process and could encourage applicants from disadvantaged and non-traditional backgrounds to apply to more selective courses and institutions in the knowledge that they had achieved the qualification necessary for admission. Individuals may also submit fewer applications overall, with the potential to lead to cost savings and greater efficiency (DBIS, 2011a, p. 54).

No specific recommendations were made for the implementation of a different admissions system, rather Government charged UCAS with examining this in more detail. Nevertheless, the interest in achieved grades perhaps indicated a continued adherence to the idea of meritocracy.

Other policy levers for fair access and social mobility presented in the White Paper included the designation of advocate roles and responsibilities within Government for social mobility and access. Alongside Milburn, Simon Hughes, a Liberal Democrat MP, was assigned responsibility for *Access to Education* in December 2010 and, after seven months published a *Report to the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister from the Advocate for Access to Education* (Hughes, 2011). *The Hughes Report* made recommendations for schools, the Department for Education, higher education institutions and DBIS:

Access to higher education, to further education or to work-based learning does not start with the applications and admissions process. Access starts much earlier, through the hopes and dreams of children (Hughes, 2011, p. 8).

In line with the White Paper, Hughes recommended the extension of Access Agreements and closer links between higher education institutions and schools. Hughes also recommended clearer advertisement of institutional bursary and

scholarship schemes and more part-time provision to assist disabled students who would become ineligible for incapacity support under the reformed national benefit system. The latter recommendations were, however, less prominent in the 2011 White Paper.

As for the idea of closer links between schools and higher education, the White Paper promoted the Realising Opportunities scheme, also introduced by the Labour Government. The scheme encouraged applications from young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to the most selective institutions:

Realising Opportunities is a unique collaboration of 12 leading universities, working together to promote fair access for, and social mobility of, students from under-represented groups.

Students are supported through a coherent programme of activities designed to raise their aspirations to go to research-intensive universities. Successful completion of the programme leads to recognition at the point of application to one of the 12 universities, where students can receive an alternative offer through UCAS (DBIS, 2011a, p. 59).

The Realising Opportunities scheme was an example of affirmative action, given that successful completion was recognised at the admissions stage by students receiving an alternative offer of up to two grades below the typical offer.

Although Government advocated the scheme as an 'excellent example' (DBIS, 2011a, p. 59), it did not make specific recommendations for its future expansion.

To further counter the potential implications for fair access of the new fees regime, the 2011 White Paper proposed two new initiatives. The National Scholarship Programme aimed to 'improve access to the least well off young people and adults' (DBIS, 2011a, p. 61) and called on all institutions charging the top-level fee to contribute. The programme would make scholarships available to students from household incomes of less than £25,000 and institutions would decide additional criteria for eligibility. Government also proposed a package of financial support for part-time and low-income students based on the entitlement for an upfront loan for part-time learners and a grant for those with family incomes of £25,000 or less. Of note, the popular Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) scheme, introduced by New Labour, had already been

discontinued by the Coalition, on the grounds of budgetary cuts. In its place, the White Paper explained that Simon Hughes, as the Advocate for Access, had been tasked with identifying a replacement scheme. Indeed, *The Hughes Report* described a new 16-19 Bursary Scheme based on a low-income bursary paid to the school (under the EMA scheme, the bursary was paid direct to the student).

Finally, Government presented careers advice and guidance as another means of supporting its fair access and social mobility objectives:

Potential students need high quality advice and guidance to make informed decisions about whether higher education is the right option for them and, if so, which route to take and what subjects to study to prepare them for their desired course (DBIS, 2011a, p. 56).

A new national initiative based on online and telephone services for young people and adults was proposed. The new service was foregrounded by a significant reduction in Government funds for the well-established Connexions service, which had provided face-to-face careers information, advice and guidance for young people.

In summary, the 2011 White Paper recommended a range of initiatives, some affirmative in nature and others endorsing best practice or a continuation of existing measures. Bringing together the approach to access-participation-mobility in 2011, the conclusion to the fifth chapter in the document illustrated the Coalition's overall priorities:

We are putting in place a range of measures to tackle the various barriers that prevent bright young people from disadvantaged backgrounds from participating in higher education. Our funding reforms provide more generous support for low-income students. This, together with the National Scholarship Programme will help tackle the financial barriers. Alongside this, we are serious about ensuring that higher education institutions actively seek to attract students from disadvantaged backgrounds and expect that the new Access Agreements and a stronger role for the Office for Fair Access will promote this. Our continuing support for Access courses should help those who left school early or have been out of education for a number of years. Together these measures should promote fairer access to higher education (DBIS, 2011a, p. 65).

In essence, and with the prospect of undergraduate tuition fees doubling, the access-participation-mobility policies of 2011 sought primarily to address the anticipated financial barriers to access that might emerge as a result.

#### **8.4 Related themes: student number controls, the market and austerity**

The policies on fair access and social mobility were part of a much broader and significant programme of reform in 2011. Specifically, the structural reforms presented in the fourth chapter intended to ‘free up’ the higher education market and encourage competition. The new number control policy, the ‘flexible “core and margin” model’, was also proposed for the academic year 2012/13 (DBIS, 2011a, p. 50). As outlined in Chapter 2 of this thesis, this new policy would effectively mean the careful administration by each higher education institution of two sets of undergraduate student numbers (as well as managing their international intake) to avoid heavy fines administered by HEFCE, should they overshoot their allocated quotas.

In the new core/margin model, institutions would be ‘free’ to recruit as many high achieving students (attaining AAB grades at A-level or higher, or equivalent) as they chose, or were available in the market. Government described the core/margin policy as follows:

In 2012/13 there will be two elements in this new approach. We propose to allow unrestrained recruitment of high achieving students, scoring the equivalent of AAB or above at A-level. Core allocations for all institutions will be adjusted to remove these students. Institutions will then be free to recruit as many of these students as wish to come. Under the new funding arrangements, institutions may be eligible for HEFCE teaching grant for these students, for example those on high-cost courses, and the students will be able to access loans and grants. This should allow greater competition for places on the more selective courses and create the opportunity for more students to go to their first choice institution if that university wishes to take them (DBIS, 2011a, p. 50).

The AAB policy set forth a completely new framework for managing student numbers and, for the first time, linked Government funding to entry grades. Equivalences to grades of AAB or higher were later defined in a relatively limited list of alternative qualifications published by HEFCE (2011).

Importantly, the core/margin policy was rationalised by broader discourses, which placed market principles and competition alongside austerity and value for money as core priorities. Linking state funding to academic attainment would, however, undoubtedly, have a bearing on access. If, as the 2011 White Paper asserted, correlations could be identified between lower attainment and poorer social background, institutions would be competing for young people from privileged backgrounds, as students in this group were more likely to achieve higher grades. However, the core/margin policy was presented in a different chapter of the White Paper to that on fair access and social mobility, with limited cross-referencing between the two. In addition, the new number controls were not accompanied by any forecasts for growth in student numbers or by any specific targets for future expansion in the higher education participation rate.

## **8.5 Conclusions**

The 2011 White Paper combined a broad range of priorities, the majority of which were technocratic, structural and ideological in nature. The sets of ideas underpinning this White Paper were dominated by a rebalancing of the state and higher education relationship. A retraction in state funding, and acceleration of market principles were two important elements of the 2011 discourses. At the same time, and as a response to the financial reforms, Government called on institutions to fulfil new responsibilities around social mobility and fair access. The weighting of the priorities and challenges outlined in 2011 suggested that the economic policies, notably lifting the tuition fee cap to £9,000 (the idea that the individual pays), increasing competition and differentiation (promoting the market) and student number controls (linking attainment to state funding) were higher in the pecking order than those concerning equity.

As for the representation of access-participation-mobility, *Students at the Heart of the System* was predominantly concerned with *fair access* and *social mobility*. The language of the document is largely functional and technical, often describing the current state of play as regards participation. Whilst ideology was apparent in 2011, the language was not expressly emotive or aspirational in style. In this context, the expression of mobility and access objectives pivoted largely on an objective to promote access for young people from low-income backgrounds to

full-time undergraduate programmes at the most selective and prestigious institutions.

# ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

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## 9. Analysis and Discussion

### Introduction

This chapter sets out the findings of the study and considers their implications for higher education policy-making on matters of access-participation-mobility. It is based on a thematic analysis exploring the narratives of continuity and change which have framed policy expressions of access-participation-mobility during the twenty-five year period. This also includes examining how the nature of successive higher education White Papers has evolved. In addition, the relationships between discourses on equity and other discourses, such as marketisation, are discussed to further understand the ideas underpinning policy articulations of access-participation-mobility. Drawing on the analysis and discussion, a summary of the overarching findings of the study is presented at the end of the chapter.

The research questions for the thesis explored *how* the concepts of access, participation and mobility were *represented* in official policy texts on higher education in England between 1987 and 2012. Three supplementary research questions were also posed, firstly, to identify the content and character of access-participation-mobility as *sets of ideas* in official policy texts. Secondly, to understand whether expressions of access-participation-mobility have *changed over time* and, if so, how; and, thirdly, to examine how discourses on access-participation-mobility *interact* with other discourses in the core texts.

The chapter is organised in five sections:

- Narratives of continuity and change: the main shifts in expressions of access-participation-mobility, namely the move from widening access to fair access, from widening participation to social mobility, and towards distributive justice.

- The changing character of the White Papers: how the content and genre of the higher education White Papers have evolved alongside the narratives on access-participation-mobility.
- From collective to individual benefits: how the purpose of higher education has been interpreted in official policy contexts, focussing on the move from higher education as a social and public good to higher education as a private good.
- Economic value, meritocracy and marketisation: the interaction between discourses on access-participation-mobility and other discourses featuring in the White Papers.
- The main findings: a summary and review of the chief findings of the study.

To guide the analysis, a framework is presented, which compares key features, themes and contexts in each White Paper (Table 9.1). Along with the core concepts, drivers and measures associated with access-participation-mobility, their genres are highlighted and their relationships to growth policies and claims to public-private benefits are indicated. Importantly, the framework is a means by which narratives of continuity and change can be traced and illustrated.

### **9.1 Narratives of continuity and change**

Exploring the narratives of continuity and change in the White Papers sheds light on *how* access-participation-mobility have been represented and the extent to which these expressions have changed over time. These features are described and brought into relationship in Table 9.1. The framework captures shifts in language in the representation of access-participation-mobility whilst illustrating changes in the sets of ideas underpinning these expressions. Shifts in policy drivers and related policies on expansion and reform, are also presented to further understand the expressions of the three concepts and consider their interaction with other key discourses. The framework provides the starting point for the analysis, upon which a more detailed discussion is based.



**Table 9.1****Framework for analysis: key themes and features of the White Papers**

<b>White Paper</b>	<b>Meeting the Challenge 1987</b>	<b>A New Framework 1991</b>	<b>The Future of Higher Education 2003</b>	<b>Students at the Heart of the System 2011</b>
<b>Government (Prime Minister)</b>	Conservative (Margaret Thatcher)	Conservative (John Major)	Labour (Tony Blair)	Conservative-Liberal Democrat (David Cameron)
<b>Department (Lead Minister)</b>	Education and Science (Kenneth Baker)	Education and Science (Kenneth Clarke)	Education & Skills (Charles Clarke)	Business, Innovation & Skills (David Willetts, Conservative & Vince Cable, Liberal)
<b>Genre</b>	Technocratic Follows 1985 Green Paper Projections for growth	Technocratic No Green Paper Projections for growth	Ideological, aspirational (vision) No Green Paper (Dearing Review) Target for growth	Technocratic, functional, ideological No Green Paper (Browne Review) No projections for growth
<b>Public/Private good</b>	Public and private good State funding	Public and private good State funding	Public (and private) good Cost sharing	Private good Student pays
<b>Expansion policies</b>	Expansion	Expansion Mass participation: 33% by 2000 goal End of binary line for competition	Expansion Near universal participation: 50% by 2010 target	No explicit target for expansion 'Core/Margin' number controls Diversification, competition
<b>Drivers</b>	Economic: recession, 'manpower' needs Rationalisation and Efficiency Good for society	Economic recovery: 'manpower' needs Rationalisation and Efficiency (Good for society)	Economic growth: global competition, knowledge economy, 'skills gaps' Good for society and fairness	Economic recovery: financial crisis, austerity Individual benefit (mobility)

White Paper	Meeting the Challenge 1987	A New Framework 1991	The Future of Higher Education 2003	Students at the Heart of the System 2011
<b>Concepts: access- participation- mobility*</b>	<b>Widening Access</b> 'Modified' Robbins Principle (Meritocracy, fairness)	<b>Widening Access</b> 'Modified' Robbins Principle (Meritocracy, fairness)	<b>Widening Participation, Fair Access</b> (Robbins Principle: potential) Social Justice, fairness, (Meritocracy)	<b>Social Mobility, Fair Access</b> Robbins Principle: austerity, achievement + potential (Meritocracy)
<b>Policies: access- participation- mobility</b>	Opening up entry routes Continuing Education	Re-iteration of 1987 Access policies Standardisation of national Admissions service	Widening participation: under- represented groups Lifelong learning	Fair access: young people, low- income backgrounds to most selective universities Access to the professions
<b>Levers: access- participation- mobility</b>	New, recognised entry routes: Access courses, vocational Mature learners: up-skilling, re- training	Re-iteration of 1987 levers	Raising attainment, 'aspiration', School outreach Foundation Degrees 'Second chance' routes: Access courses Fair admissions Call for data on access selective institutions Access premium, Access regulator (OFFA), Access Agreements Grants for low-income backgrounds	Raising school attainment New powers for OFFA Access Agreements Contextual admissions (affirmative action) Recognition of outreach at admission (affirmative) Part-time learner maintenance loan National Scholarship Programme

\*Explicit expressions of access-participation-mobility are emboldened for emphasis. Sets of ideas underpinning these expressions are shown in brackets.

As the framework for analysis demonstrates, the leading narratives on equity in higher education have shifted two-fold between 1987 and 2012: from *widening access* to *fair access* and from *widening participation* to *social mobility*. There has also been a gradual shift towards distributive justice for specified groups, which has been coupled with a weakening of continuing education and lifelong learning narratives. While expressions of access-participation-mobility *have* changed over time, the evolution of these narratives has by no means been linear in nature. Furthermore, the career of each concept is linked to that of other concepts; their development has not, therefore, been discreet. Specific concepts also take on new meanings in particular policy eras, especially where a change in Government was the context for new languages and idioms, policy rationales and policy levers. Indeed, specific concepts have appeared with differing degrees of emphasis in each era and, typically, alongside different qualifiers and related concepts.

#### **9.1.1 From widening access to fair access**

Although narratives on access-participation-mobility have been punctuated by changes in Government, some concepts have straddled different policy eras, and this is particularly the case for *access*. *Access* is the only one of the three concepts to have featured explicitly in each of the four White Papers. Specific policy expressions of access have, however, developed over time, with *widening access* featuring in 1987 and 1991, compared with *fair access* in 2003 and 2011.

At their broadest, expressions of access have some basic similarities in their concern for the principles and mechanisms bearing on *entry to* higher education. The framework shows that an important narrative of continuity across the twenty-five year period is the alignment to the Robbins Principle on Access as a policy rationale. As a guiding principle, the Robbins perspective on access to higher education has been adopted and affirmed almost universally during each policy era and across different Governments. Although appearing in different contexts and under different interpretations, notions of equality of opportunity, fairness and meritocracy, as general tenets of the Robbins Principle, have relevance in each of the White Papers.

The purpose and emphasis of policies on access provide further clues to the sets of ideas underpinning the different iterations of *access*. In 1987 and 1991

*widening access* is primarily about broadening the entry routes into higher education and opening up recognised routes for adults to re-enter at any life stage. The focus on qualifications, as currency for higher education entry, reinforces a key feature of education and access in England. As noted in Chapter 1, Turner's model of sponsored mobility (1960) and its focus on merit and selection, is embodied in the 1987 articulations of access. Indeed, *widening access* was not about *open access* and the message was clear that academic achievement should, in the main, continue to govern entry to higher education. Nevertheless, and despite being framed by a heavily technocratic discourse, 1987 was a significant milestone for access to higher education in England. Access underwent a much broader interpretation than in previous policies, including the Robbins inquiry.

Given that the 1991 White Paper simply reiterates the 1987 policies on widening access, for the purposes of examining articulations of access-participation-mobility 1987 and 1991 can be considered as one policy era. Access policies in 2003, then, became more numerous and various; and were allied to notions of *social justice* and *fairness*. By 2003, while the economic rationale for widening access is transferred to the drivers for *widening participation* (particularly the 50 per cent participation target), *fair access* is underpinned by an explicit policy concern for the collective, civic role of higher education. The extent of access policies is at its broadest in 2003, not least with the creation of a national independent body responsible for monitoring fair access (OFFA) and the requirement on institutions to produce Access Agreements. The 2003 expressions of access also initiated the idea of *fair admissions* as a guiding principle for equity, and led to the publication of related, official texts such as the Schwartz Review of Fair Admissions.

The career of access, as a policy motif for equity, took on a new direction in 2011. At the same time, the majority of the 2003 access policies feature in 2011, despite a change in Government. However, the ideas of social justice and fairness do not feature explicitly alongside the later articulations of *fair access*. The rationale for fair access is a more individualised version in 2011; and the focus moved from the entry of all under-represented groups to all forms of higher education to one which emphasised the access of young people from low-income families to full-

time undergraduate education at the most selective universities. This narrowing of focus is evidenced by research that highlights both a persistence of inequality in these areas (Boliver, 2013; Sutton Trust, 2010, 2011). It also combines a lessening or, indeed, silencing of policy interest in patterns of inequality associated with other under-represented groups, including specific ethnic minorities (Boliver, 2014). Participation in other types of higher education is underplayed, although greater competition between public and private providers was expected to diversify types of provision and modes of study.

The context and discourse of austerity limits the scope of the 2011 articulations of access. Furthermore, near-universal participation (more than half the age group in higher education) had already been achieved by 2011. Nevertheless, the access policies continued to be relatively extensive and narratives on fair admissions advanced considerably between 2003 and 2011. Different sets of ideas also come to the fore in 2011, some in tension with each other. As an example, the more directive approach to affirmative action in 2011 placed greater responsibility on higher education institutions to mediate fair access through their own contextual admissions institutional policies. Although a specific call by Government, this policy was perhaps in place of a state organised approach and was framed by an acceleration of marketisation, traditionally associated with a reduced role of the state. A state organised approach would, indeed, have challenged the idea of institutional autonomy and, even without a nationally organised approach, the 2011 articulation of fair access in admissions proved highly controversial (Henry, 2012).

### **9.1.2 From widening participation to social mobility**

While increasing participation is mooted as an expectation in 1987 and a continuing goal in 1991, *widening participation* emerged explicitly in 2003, following its elaboration in the 1997 Dearing Report. Widening participation does not, however, feature extensively in the 2011 White Paper. Instead, the focus moves to *social mobility*. Key events leading up to the 2003 White Paper, including the Laura Spence affair, created the context for the new *widening participation* agenda. The policy concern was re-orientated from participation by all cohorts to *under-represented groups*. Targeting under-represented groups was also compatible with the broader policy concern for social justice and fairness,

rather than the previous Government concerns, which had focused almost exclusively on increasing the supply of qualified manpower.

In addition, the 50 per cent participation target was framed by economic concerns. The link between higher education and the economy became more explicit by 2003, not least owing to Tony Blair's claim, described in Chapter 7, that education was the Government's 'best economic policy' (DfEE, 1998b, p. 9). The representation of participation in 2003 was foregrounded more explicitly, than in 1987 and 1991, by sets of ideas associated with the economic and social functions of higher education. Although, in this context, social mobility emerged as a policy motif towards the end of the Labour Government, by 2011 it was a leading concept and aspiration for the Coalition. In 2011 social mobility takes the place of widening participation in 2003, at least in its status in the White Paper. The lesser emphasis on widening participation in 2011 also aligns with the omission of any specific projections or targets for growth in the participation rate in the last White Paper, as indicated in the evolution of policies on expansion illustrated in the framework for analysis.

The policy concern for social mobility in 2011 focuses on 'relative mobility', principally ensuring fair chances for attaining the chosen career or income range, at all skills levels (DBIS, 2011a, p. 54). However, the representation of social mobility in 2011 in the White Paper and related texts emphasises upward movement achieved through participation in the most selective universities and access to the elite professions and occupations. This interpretation of social mobility tends to downplay the status of other professions, for example those requiring highly technical skills supplied by specialist higher education. A focus on (upward) movement within the higher education system and the labour market might also be seen to draw attention away from growing inequalities in wealth and income in the larger society.

### **9.1.3 Towards distributive justice and a dilution of lifelong learning**

Marginson (2014) suggests that human capital theory (an acceptance of the economic value of higher education) and equality of opportunity are consistent policy rationales for expanding higher education participation. Prior to this, Trow (1974) suggested that sociological factors could present important drivers for

growth, including expansion of the middle classes and a subsequent expectation that, as higher education grows, it should become a right for all rather than a privilege for a minority. Democratisation (as defined in Chapter 1) can, therefore, feature as a meta-narrative framing the transitions between elite-mass-universal statuses. The observations of Marginson and Trow are relevant to the 1987-2012 period in England, with participation rates and demand growing rapidly (often exceeding Government forecasts), while Government has presented growth as good for the economy *and* society.

Specifically in relation to policies on access-participation-mobility, the alignment to the Robbins Principle on Access as a policy rationale for widening participation and fair access suggests a broader narrative of democratisation has accompanied mass expansion in England. As noted in Chapter 4 in relation to the processes by which concepts and ideas are 'naturalised' through discourse (Fairclough, 1995), the principles of equality of opportunity, fairness and meritocracy, as features of democratisation, enjoy a 'common sense' status between 1987 and 2012. As Hyatt (2013) suggests, once such language practices take on this status they become 'inevitable and beyond challenge', taking on the character of 'accepted conventions' (p. 840).

As for policy motifs framed by the idea of democratisation, 'continuing education' is the first to feature in 1987 and 1991. Although not necessarily an explicit intention, the new arrangements introduced by the earlier White Papers, together with the broader interpretation of access, helped to create the conditions for expansion on a mass scale. Despite expansion being far from even, *continuing education* opened up the idea of adults benefitting from higher education later in life who may not have otherwise, or previously, had the opportunity to do so. As reported in Chapter 5, the 1987 White Paper made reference to relevant research into patterns of participation by socio-economic background. In many ways, this planted the seed for later policy concerns for distributive justice, despite a change in Government.

Distributive justice was an implicit policy concern underpinning *widening participation* in 2003 and its focus on under-represented groups. At the same time, the idea of democratisation became more explicit in 2003, with British

universities portrayed as 'central to the health of our economy and our *democracy*' (DfES, 2003, p. 92). Although the policy rationale in 2003 was about closing skills gaps and establishing a globally competitive economy, creating opportunities for 'second chances' for adults in the form of 'lifelong learning' (rather than 'continuing education') was another objective. As such, the evolution of narratives on democratisation and distributive justice overlap in 2003. There was an explicit policy aspiration for *democratisation* (via the 50 per cent target), whilst policy levers (in the form of widening participation initiatives for under-represented groups), acknowledged specific concerns for *distributive justice*.

Interpretations of democratisation and distributive justice entered a new phase in 2011. Firstly, there was no targeted policy for growth in the 2011 White Paper, and, secondly, no reference to continuing education or lifelong learning. In addition, continuing education and lifelong learning as contexts for widening access and participation were replaced with a growing policy concern for retention, 'success' and outcomes. While the earlier two White Papers were primarily concerned with *getting in* (access), latterly the emphasis has been on success in higher education as a platform for social mobility. This shift has been coupled with an emergent 'lifecycle' approach to social mobility, directing policy efforts towards specific milestones, from early years development to employment:

There should be help and support at every stage to narrow the gaps and provide second chances. That is why our strategy is based on a lifecycle framework. Our goal is to make life chances more equal at the critical points for social mobility such as: the early years of development; school readiness at age five; GCSE attainment; the choice of options at 16; gaining a place at university or on an Apprenticeship; and getting into and on in the labour market. These are the crucial moments, where we can make the most difference (Cabinet Office, 2011, p. 6).

## **9.2 The changing character of the White Papers**

Alongside the narratives of continuity and change, there was evolution in the character and style of the White Papers. Their function and purpose developed in such a way that, in the later years, they served as both a Green and White Paper. While the 1987 White Paper followed a detailed Green Paper, and the 1991 White Paper draws extensively on the 1985 Green and 1987 White Papers, the 2003 and



2011 White Papers signalled specific and immediate legislative changes. They also included their own (generally short) consultative timetable. This observation is supported by other research, which describes more recent White Papers as having 'green edges' (Leach et al, 2006, p. 235). Along this trajectory, related official texts have served some Green Paper functions. As the framework shows, the Dearing Report of 1997 and Browne Review of 2010 laid the foundations for key policies in the 2003 and 2011 White Papers.

Together with changes in their function and purpose, the genre of the higher education White Papers evolved from a short, technocratic report to a more descriptive, wordy document. The 1987 and 1991 White Papers are similar in genre and in their policies on access-participation-mobility. These two papers set the access policies in a technocratic language. While they recognised that higher education was 'good for society', the style of the 1987 and 1991 documents reinforced the economic ('manpower') justification for widening access and continuing education. There is limited elaboration on the rationales for these and the other policies in 1987 and 1991; they are presented almost as givens, perhaps owing to the earlier, consultative Green Paper. In contrast, the 2003 and 2011 White Papers describe more extensively the current state of play and policy recommendations, presumably due to the lack of a Green Paper to set the scene. Specifically, the collective language of 2003 provides the framework for a more aspirational expression of access, participation and social justice. Mulderrig (2012) also suggests, the pronoun 'we' has been used increasingly in official policy since its introduction by New Labour. She contends that New Labour 'inherited a neoliberal consensus on the relationship between economy, state and society' from the previous Conservative Government and, in this context, promoted a 'discourse of inclusion' to help justify its policy decisions on education (p. 704).

The 2003 White Paper gives the impression of a heightened, almost frenetic, tempo of policy activity. An extended range of objectives bear on this White Paper, including the introduction of variable fees and an ambitious target for expanding participation. Furthermore, the loss of the Green Paper by 2003 coincided with a host of related policy texts in the form of Government commissioned studies, literature reviews, strategy papers and assorted reports. The growth of official policy texts brought new complexities to the policy

landscape and new challenges for Government to ensure key narratives and policies were consistent. Within this context, the more emotive reference to the ideals of social justice and fairness, alongside a collective vision for higher education and intense focus on the economic value of higher education suggests that the nature of the higher education White Paper had become more ideological by 2003. As Brown (2013) notes, higher education policy-making has taken on ‘an increasingly ideological form, which has emphasised the economic role of higher education and created a higher education “market”’ (p. 118).

Although similar in length and extent of description to its predecessor, the genre of the 2011 White Paper is less consistent than the earlier White Papers. A mix of collective, ideological, formal and technocratic language can be detected throughout the text. This mix of genres contributes to the loss of clarity around the long-term vision for higher education in 2011. The breadth and tempo of 2003 decreases by 2011 with a more narrowly defined, yet divergent, set of drivers and policies focused on implementation of the new fees regime, higher education development within the contexts of austerity and affirmative action in institutional admissions policies. A more explicit ideological stance is apparent in the 2011 White Paper, although this time in relation to austerity, opening the system to the market and driving up competition between institutions, as other readings of this White Paper substantiate (Collini, 2011; Thompson and Bekhradnia, 2011).

### **9.3 From collective to individual benefits**

A summary of the drivers and approaches to higher education as a public and private good in the framework for analysis indicates that, as narratives promoting greater competition between institutions have unfolded, those concerning higher education as a social good, offering collective benefits for society as a whole, have moved towards higher education as a private good, principally offering individual benefits. As Marginson (2007) observes, national policy plays an important role in shaping perspectives on the purpose of higher education:

Higher education institutions are more or less ‘public’ and ‘private’ according to the policy and funding configuration chosen for them. In turn, that configuration always rests on one or other philosophical position (p. 413).

Another tangible indicator of Government positions on the purpose of higher education is its policies on student finance, in particular whether the student should pay. Whilst the messages of 1987 and 1991 demonstrate that higher education was still seen, primarily, as a state responsibility, they nevertheless highlight the need for more efficiency, economy and transparency in the use of public funds. This narrative continued and intensified under the New Labour Government, beginning with the introduction of fees for domestic students studying for full-time undergraduate education and then using the 2003 White Paper to argue for variable fees up to a raised maximum. At the same time, the 2003 policy motifs of social justice and fairness align closely with the idea of higher education as a force for social good. Although the 2003 White Paper was at pains to present an ideal model of higher education offering collective *and* individual benefits, the tensions between these ideas were not fully acknowledged. Furthermore, the introduction of tuition fees at the end of the 1990s, and then a higher maximum level in 2006, placed individual benefits at the forefront during the New Labour era.

By 2011, the individual benefits of higher education were a dominant feature of Government policy. As Shattock (2012) suggests, while the student finance policies of 2011 could be interpreted as a straightforward fiscal policy, they illustrate a broader ideological shift that took place between 1987 and 2012:

Another representation would be to see them [the 2011 financial reforms] as a slow reversal, except in Scotland, of the view, strongly held in 1945-46, that the provision of opportunities for higher education was a public rather than a private good for which the state must, therefore, be responsible (pp. 155-156).

The more substantial narratives on marketisation and competition in the 2011 White Paper parallel the later policy articulations of social mobility. In particular, the concern for *the individual* and his or her advancement by way of the more selective universities and the high-status professions point strongly to the idea of higher education as a predominantly private good. Under conditions of global fiscal crisis and subsequent policies of retrenchment and austerity, the narratives

promoting the role of higher education in social mobility take on additional significance. As Collini (2012) argues:

Universities are increasingly being expected to be instruments of social mobility, as society's bad conscience about entrenched inequalities seeks solace from misleading metaphors about 'level playing fields' that allow it to pretend that expanded recruitment to higher education can be a substitute for real structural change to the distribution of wealth in society (p. 92).

Indeed, such is the policy work required of social mobility that it has taken on the function of a condensation symbol. In official policy contexts, social mobility is used to draw together complex and often contradictory ideas about society and the economy while enjoying a broad appeal across the political spectrum. Although the notion of widening participation performed similar functions in 2003, its symbolism and general appeal do not appear to have been as powerful as social mobility. Alternatively, social mobility has become an important Government vision featuring extensively in equity debates, not just about higher education. In a similar way to how the implicit ideas of equality of opportunity, meritocracy and fairness have been naturalised, so too has social mobility, although (this time) as an *explicit* policy motif with its own sets of associated ideas.

Although a lifecycle approach to mobility invites a more holistic view of social opportunity and mobility, the most selective universities, in particular, are under increasing pressure to play a part in mediating and mitigating the effects of deepening inequality. In this context, policy attention since 2011 has turned to widening participation in postgraduate study, with new funding initiatives being framed as 'good for students, good for universities and good for the economy' (HEFCE, 2013). Expressions of access-participation-mobility in the sphere of higher education policy, therefore, continue to construct higher education as a private good serving, first and foremost, an economic function, which benefits the individual. However, a preoccupation with individual benefits is likely to be in tension with a lifecycle approach, which seeks to resolve social inequalities comprehensively and collectively. Equally, the prospect of downward movement and the issue of displacement are rarely addressed within policy articulations of social mobility. Instead, the assumption has been of upward movement. These

tensions and omissions create ambiguities in policy expressions of social mobility, further highlighting its important role as a condensation symbol in the core texts.

#### **9.4 Economic value, meritocracy and marketisation**

Whilst the rationale for policies on access-participation-mobility can, almost exclusively, be explained by the economic value of higher education (human capital theory) and meritocracy (equality of opportunity), examining other discourses in the White Papers gives a more complete picture of the ideas shaping policies on access-participation-mobility. Efforts to *widen access* in 1987 and 1991 align with a broader policy concern for establishing a co-ordinated, national higher education system, which would be achieved through the abolition of the binary line and encouraging more competition between institutions. Although the widening access and continuing education policies were not subordinate to the other policies set out in the 1987 and 1991 White Papers, their primary function was to support economic objectives. In contrast, an important role of the policies and discourses on fair access, widening participation and lifelong learning in 2003 was to counterbalance the narratives on cost sharing and the role of variable fees. Similarly, the 2011 policies on social mobility and fair access serve to offset the narratives associated with austerity and a three-fold increase in tuition fees. As the Social Mobility Strategy affirmed:

Our reforms to higher education funding put new obligations on universities to improve access. In particular, those universities charging over £6,000 will have to attract more students from less affluent backgrounds (Cabinet Office, 2011, p. 7).

During the twenty-five year period, expressions of access-participation-mobility have done considerable policy work to *support* Government aspirations for the economy and, latterly, to *offset* equity-related concerns surrounding structural and financial reforms. In this way, policies on access-participation-mobility have been increasingly subordinated to economic and technocratic objectives. The nature of economic objectives has also changed, shifting from a focus on rationalisation, efficiency and manpower needs towards students as consumers, the market and global competition and, more recently, austerity.

Trow's observation (1974) that the passage to mass higher education can create new sources of tension is particularly salient to how expressions of access-participation-mobility interact with other key policies on reform. In his reading of the 1991 White Paper Trow (1992) argued that the multiple and conflicting sets of ideas underpinning the document presented specific challenges for the system:

The strategy adopted in the UK seems almost to have been designed to create very high levels of difficulty. It is marked by very high levels of uncertainty about the future, and unclear, and indeed conflicting expectations on the part of nearly all the participants in the system. British academics, on the whole, find themselves exposed to contradictory incentives and disincentives marked by unclear signals from central Government about where it is going or what it wants (Trow, 1992, p. 218).

The recognition that White Papers on higher education seek to combine and reconcile a range of different and difficult positions continues to be pertinent. For example, the popularity of meritocracy as a framework for access-participation-mobility policies, as evidenced by repeated policy concerns for a 'level playing field' in the 2011 White Paper, is combined with claims for the benefits of greater competition. Yet meritocracy, in its classical sense, favours selection and academic achievement as principles for access to higher education, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2.

Each of the White Papers refer implicitly to meritocracy, specifically the notion that individuals should have equal chance to participate in higher education regardless of their social background and status. Meritocracy has, however, undergone different interpretations between 1987 and 2012. By recognising new entry routes, the 1987 and 1991 White Papers interpreted meritocracy more generously than previously. In 2003, meritocracy and social justice were presented as complementary principles in the discourses of successive Blair governments. Importantly, Lawton (2005) warned against New Labour's pre-occupation with meritocracy and its emphasis on academic achievement as a 'supreme arbiter', which, he suggested, would lead to new forms of unfairness (p. 161). However, the idea of contextualised admissions decisions, first presented in the 2004 Schwartz Report, implied a reworking of the notion of meritocracy, this

time as 'academic achievement plus *potential*', rather than Young's original formula of 'IQ plus effort' (Lane and Birds, 2013).

In 2011, the grades achieved for entry to undergraduate education became an important element of the core/margin number control policy. Although this policy ceased after 2014/15, the three years of its operation represented an important phase for policy interpretations of meritocracy. In opening up the market to 'high achieving' students, those achieving grades of AAB or higher, entry qualifications were to be regarded as a scarce resource which institutions must compete for in annual competitions for student numbers. In this way, there is relevance in the claim by Brown and Tannock (2009) that a 'new phase of neo-liberalism' and 'hyper-meritocracy' is emerging (p. 378) where 'the best are disproportionately rewarded as the (global) war for talent devalues everything other than "top" performance' (p. 384). For others commenting specifically on the 2011 White Paper, the core/margin policy would increase 'super-selection' and stratification of institutions by their entry qualifications (Blackstone, 2011, p. 27). The media were certainly quick to define high achievers as 'gold dust' (Grimston, 2011).

Again, the ambiguities and complexities associated with the *concept* of meritocracy are not acknowledged in official policy texts. Despite successive Governments recognising the relationships between socio-economic background and academic achievement, the core/margin policies effectively silenced these issues. The emergent hyper-meritocracy has also placed school-leaving qualifications and reform under increasing and considerable political attention. The Liberal Democrat party recently called for a period of stability, warning against the 'politicisation' of these agendas (Sellgren, 2014). In an earlier period, Trow (1974) warned that the 'politicisation of the university' could arise from processes of mass expansion, presenting yet further sources of tension. Indeed, the nature of policies on access-participation-mobility has been informed by socio-political change. Continued politicisation of equity agendas and subordination of access-participation-mobility policies to technocratic ends and market-led measures could, however, weaken concerns for equity as a legitimate policy goal.

## 9.5 A Summary of the main findings

Based on this analysis of themes within and between the four White Papers, six principal findings are highlighted:

1. Expressions of access-participation-mobility have shifted from widening access to fair access and from widening participation to social mobility. Access is the only concept to have featured in each of the four White Papers, albeit under different guises and with different interpretations.
2. An increasing concern for retention, 'success' and outcomes, in service of upward social mobility, has dovetailed with a dilution of continuing education and lifelong learning as concepts and contexts for widening access and widening participation.
3. In tandem with a weakening of lifelong learning, interpretations of distributive justice have narrowed, moving from a broad alignment with democratisation of access to a policy concern for participation amongst under-represented groups; and, more recently, to a focus on young people from low-income backgrounds entering the most selective universities.
4. Assumptions and assertions about the value of higher education have shifted from the collective benefits of higher education for society to the private benefits enjoyed by the individual. As such, narratives on higher education as a social good have been replaced by narratives on its function as a vehicle for social mobility, with students bearing a larger share of the costs of undergraduate study and exercising their rights and choices as consumers in a market for courses and qualifications.
5. The rationale for policies on access-participation-mobility has consistently been underpinned by interpretations of the economic value of higher education (human capital theory) and meritocracy (equality of opportunity). The complexities and ambiguities associated with the concept of



meritocracy, and its related ideas, are generally silent in its official policy articulations.

6. Access-participation-mobility policies have been increasingly subordinated to economic objectives and framed by marketisation discourses, with broad concerns for equity being displaced and downgraded.

# 10. Conclusions and Reflections

## Introduction

To conclude the study, the final chapter reflects on the research process, the benefits and shortfalls of the approach and the dilemmas faced throughout the study, particularly in relation to the research design. In addition, an examination of the key policy and legislative developments since the publication of the 2011 White Paper illustrates how narratives on access-participation-mobility continue to evolve. These aspects are considered in two concluding sections:

- A commentary on what is gained and lost by the chosen approach: an assessment of the research process, including the contribution to knowledge and the scope for further research.
- A postscript and outline of ongoing policy narratives: a summary of how policy ideas and narratives on access-participation-mobility have unfolded since 2011 and how these developments might bear on the future of these concepts, as official policy motifs for opportunity and equity.

### 10.1 What is gained and lost by the approach?

Initially, the main dilemmas of the study rested on the decision to focus on a documentary analysis. Weighing up whether the analysis of a relatively small number of policy texts would be too restrictive in scope, and whether it would yield sufficient and robust findings in relation to the chosen topic was an important part of the research design. On the one hand, locating the study within one phase of the policy cycle (text publication) would not address how the texts were composed, by whom and with what emphases, nor how they were interpreted and re-worked by practitioners. On the other, there appeared to be sufficient potential merit in pursuing a close analysis of the texts as published documents and, most importantly, as primary instruments of intended Government policy. The latter consideration fitted closely with the motivation to understand how Government formally portrayed its ideas about opportunity and equity in higher education, and in relation to the economy and society.

The cumulative and incremental nature of policy was of interest when considering which phase(s) of the policy cycle should be addressed by the study. As Ball (2010) notes:

Most policy works by accretion and sedimentation, new policies add to and overlay old ones, with the effect that new principles and innovations are merged and conflated with older rationales and previous practices. There are rarely 'clean slates' for policy makers to work with and practitioners are as a result frequently left with inconsistencies and contradictions that they must solve, suffering criticism if they do not. Policy always has to be viewed in terms of both change and continuity – what changes and what stays the same (p. 55).

The notion that policy ideas, motifs and concepts can change over time further strengthened the case for a historical documentary analysis, in order to understand how expressions of the main concepts had evolved over time. Any chosen approach had to appreciate the organic nature of policy and the inter-relationships between its different phases of development, presentation (and re-presentation), interpretation and implementation. The decision to critically analyse policy as produced text was justified, therefore, in relation to the base of knowledge and understanding generated by a comparison of core themes in a sequence of high-level policy texts. The assumption made was that the findings and insights offered by such an analysis would inform and complement studies that explored how such texts were read, interpreted and re-made in the career of the policy.

As discussed in Chapter 4, a dilemma emerging alongside the decision to concentrate on four key texts was whether supplementary interviews with policy actors should be combined with the critical analysis of the documents, and whether such an approach would strengthen the overall analysis. Undertaking an analysis of the text production *and* produced text phases would certainly have been an alternative approach, and was given considerable thought during the research design process. However, as the readings of the core texts progressed it became clear that attempting to cover both phases would have compromised one or the other. Instead, concentrating on the texts as the primary source of data allowed for a comprehensive, fine-grained and in-depth reading of the documents as texts. Interviewing those involved in the creation of policy texts would have

posed its own problems of selection (who should be interviewed?) and memory (what might be remembered?) over a period stretching back to the 1980s. As a practitioner, I had also noticed the tendency for myself and colleagues to only focus on the specific aspects of official policy documents that impact directly on one's own area of work, rather than undertaking a full and careful reading of the documents as a whole: in part due to competing priorities and, often, the need to implement required changes within short timeframes.

By focussing on published policy texts, the analysis of access-participation-mobility could be located within the overall programme of reforms presented in each core text. In turn, this shed further light on the ideas shaping their articulation over a period of twenty-five years, the drivers informing them and their relationships with the other policies presented. A detailed analysis of successive White Papers also highlighted the role they played in framing and prioritising (or otherwise) issues of opportunity and equity. As Ball (2010) shows:

Policy strategies, Acts, guidelines and initiatives are often messy, contradictory, confused and unclear. Policy is an enlightenment concept, it is about progress, it is about moving from the inadequacies of the present to some future state of perfection where everything works well and works as it should (p. 7).

Taking into account these observations, the comprehensive readings of the core texts enabled the study to highlight the extent to which specific social concepts and issues are simplified in official published policy. How these processes of simplification can underplay ambiguities and tensions associated with policy motifs for equity, as a form of social power, would also need to be highlighted. Including the policy creation phase in the study may not have allowed the space for these issues to come to the fore, at least to the extent they did within the present study. In this way, attempting to fully capture the essence of the policy documents as well as the character and nature of their creation, with their own nuances and complexities, might have limited the breadth and depth of the documentary analysis within the study.

Choosing to pursue a documentary analysis was not, however, made on the assumption that policy creation and produced text should always be examined

separately. Dedicating the study to a text analysis enabled a detailed understanding of the White Papers, their genre, policies and articulation of access-participation-mobility to be formed. The findings of the study would, therefore, provide a strong foundation for further pieces of research encompassing a wider range of types of policy text as well as interviews with Ministers, Advisers and Civil Servants. This might offer new perspectives from which to build on the analysis of the core texts in this study. Stakeholder perspectives would also shed light on the negotiations and struggles underpinning the White Papers and their presentation of access-participation-mobility matters. The influence of specific ministers over the nature of the published documents could also be explored in this context. Furthermore, examining the creation of the White Papers might complement, strengthen or, indeed, challenge the findings of this study.

As acknowledged in Chapter 4, the readings of the core texts have produced only one interpretation of the documents. Reflecting on positionality presented specific dilemmas for *how* the analysis should be undertaken, to ensure the approach was as appropriate, relevant and robust as possible. Turning to the research methods, Hyatt (2013) illustrates how Doctoral students of education are often confronted with a 'dilemma of needing to engage with policy analysis, whilst also experiencing a lack of certainty in how to accomplish such an inquiry' (p. 834). This dilemma was compounded by the recognition that 'many of the terms used in policy analysis and in policy texts are slippery and consequently meanings are often elusive' (Ball, 2010, p. 6). As a consequence, the research design was carefully developed to avoid constructing the policy documents as a static product existing outside of their social, historical, political and economic contexts.

The critical analysis of discourse and the concepts used in the policy texts sought to locate the documents in their broader settings. Each reading of the White Paper set out the socio-economic and political backdrop to each policy era, as demonstrated in Chapters 5 to 8. The review of developments in English higher education since 1945 in Chapter 2 also provided a wider lens for examining the documents under investigation. Indeed, the analysis and findings of the research were able to draw on an historical and contextual understanding of events leading

up to, and situating, each of the four documents. Without these contextualisations, it would have been difficult to make sense of the texts, their drivers and the sets of ideas they carried and communicated.

The nature of policy and, in particular, the proliferation of policy texts in the latter phases of the twenty-five year period presented specific challenges in selecting a corpus of related texts to draw on in the analysis. As the White Papers are the main vehicle for Government policy and legislation on higher education, the analysis used related texts, such as official reports, guidelines and strategy papers, to help build a fuller picture of the White Papers, their contexts, policies and key narratives. Further research studies might bring other policy texts into the main analysis to explore their own representations of access-participation-mobility. Such a study would respond to the following observations about the character of policy as a process:

Policy that is “announced” through legislation is reproduced and reworked over time through reports, speeches, “moves”, “agendas” and so on. Therefore, policy is not treated as an object, a product or an outcome but rather as a process, something ongoing, interactional and unstable (Ball, 2010, p. 7).

## **10.2 Postscript: ongoing policy narratives**

Significant policy and legislative changes have taken place since the publication of the 2011 White Paper. The majority of the measures set out in the last White Paper have been implemented, including an extended remit for OFFA and new guidelines for developing institutional Access Agreements and measuring progress against them (OFFA, 2013). Alongside the publication of related texts on social mobility (see Cabinet Office, 2012, and Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014), OFFA continues to focus on fair access to higher education and has more recently promoted a ‘student lifecycle’ approach. In part, this draws on the narratives emerging towards the end of the 1987-2012 period, which in addition to fairness at admission emphasised successful completion and employment outcomes (OFFA, 2014b). Articulations of social mobility in other official policies published since 2011 also present a lifecycle approach. The representation of social mobility and higher education continues, however, to focus on low-income backgrounds and access to the ‘top universities and jobs’ (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014). In the context of a lifecycle

approach new funds have been made available for widening participation in postgraduate taught programmes. As Chapter 9 notes, these new initiatives continue to be justified primarily on the grounds of their economic and individual benefits.

The core/margin number control policy was introduced for students entering higher education in 2012/13. This set the annual rules and conditions by which institutions were expected to compete for high achieving students. For students entering in 2013/14, following concerns expressed by schools, universities and awarding bodies, HEFCE adjusted its definition of 'high achievers' down to those attaining ABB grades or higher and, equally important, it brought more alternative qualifications into its set of equivalences. These equivalences were adjusted, yet again, for 2014/15 to include other entry qualifications. The core/margin policy has since been abandoned. For students entering in 2015/16, the cap on eligible numbers for government-backed fee loans has been removed and, in future, institutions will compete for domestic students at all attainment levels. This is designed to reduce the role of the state and foster more market-like conditions for the recruitment of students and the development of courses. The Government estimates that the number of places will increase by 100,000 by 2020 (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014). This policy ambition does not, however, include a specific target for growth in the participation rate. Rather, the market is expected to shape the future pattern of supply and demand in English higher education.

On student finance, the cap on tuition fees was raised to £9,000 for new students starting undergraduate study from September 2012. Faced with increasing competition from other institutions and a reduction in the teaching grant, the majority of universities opted to charge the maximum fee from 2012/13. While the achievement-based number controls were relatively short-lived, the reform of academic and vocational qualifications launched by the Coalition Government will inject an additional dimension into discourses on access and quality in higher education. The academic reforms to A-level qualifications are intended to better equip students for higher-level study. The vocational reforms, which build on the recommendations of Government commissioned *Review of Vocational Education - The Wolf Report* (Wolf, 2011), will establish core qualifications in vocational

education and training, including those available to people on apprenticeships at the intermediate and higher levels.

Ahead of a general election in 2015, policy and political debates have continued to focus extensively on social mobility since 2011, not only in higher education but also in other spheres of education and social policy. Indeed, social mobility is a policy motif embraced by politicians of all parties:

The subject I have chosen to talk on is social mobility. Nick Clegg has recognised the importance of this debate and has given shape and substance to what was once a worthy yet amorphous concept. But now everyone wants a piece of this fashionable mantra, which increasingly litters political speeches from all parties (Cable, 2012).

As narratives on access-participation-mobility adapt to these conditions or take new directions, there is likely to be a need for a White Paper on higher education soon after the next general election. This might also be preceded by another (short) inquiry into funding and student finance in higher education, although neither major party has suggested the need for this. One reason for another policy review and White Paper is that the Coalition Government was not able to introduce its proposed legislation for a new regulatory framework covering both public and private higher education. Another reason is that issues of access, participation and mobility are likely to require a continuation of monitoring and reporting by the state and its agencies, if markets (or their alternatives) are to demonstrate their wider benefits to students, the economy and the society.



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